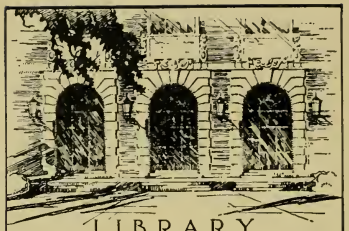

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WHITELADIES.

VOL. III.

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WHITELADIES

By Mrs. OLIPHANT

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WHITELADIES.

CHAPTER I.

HERBERT and Reine had settled at Cannes for the winter, when Giovanna settled herself at Whiteladies. They knew very little of this strange inmate in their old home, and thought still less. The young man had been promoted from one point to another of the invalid resorts, and now remained at Cannes, which was so much brighter and less valetudinary than Mentone, simply, as the doctors said, "as a precautionary measure." Does the reader know that bright sea-margin, where the sun shines so serene and sweet, and where the colour of the sea and the sky and the hills and the trees is all brightened and glorified by the fact that the greys and chills of northern winter are still close at hand? When one has little to do, when one is

fancy free, when one is young, and happiness comes natural, there is nothing more delicious than the Riviera. You are able, in such circumstances, to ignore the touching groups which encircle here and there some of the early doomed. You are able to hope that the invalids must get better. You say to yourself, "In this air, under this sky, no one can long insist upon being ill;" and if your own invalid, in whom you are most interested, has really mended, hope for every other becomes conviction. And then there are always idlers about who are not ill, to whom life is a holiday, or seems so, and who, being impelled to amuse themselves by force of circumstances, add a pleasant movement to the beautiful scene. Without even these attractions, is not the place in which you receive back your sick as from the dead always beautiful, if it were the dirtiest seaport or deserted village? Mud and grey sky, or sands of gold and heavenly vaults of blue, what matters? That was the first time since the inspired and glorious moment at Kandersteg that Reine had felt *sure* of Herbert's recovery;—there was no doubting the fact now. He was even no longer an invalid, a change which at first was not nearly so delightful as she had expected to his sister. They had been all in all to each other for

so long; and Reine had given up to Herbert not only willingly, but joyfully, all the delights of youth—its amusements, its companionships, everything. She had never been at a (grown up) ball in her life, though she was now over twenty. She had passed the last four years, the very quintessence of her youth, in a sick room, or in the subdued goings out and gentle amusements suited to an invalid; and, indeed, her heart and mind being fully occupied, she had desired no better. Herbert, and his comfort and his entertainment, had been the sum of all living to Reine. And now had come the time when she was emancipated, and when the young man, recovering his strength, began to think of other amusements than those which a girl could share. It was quite natural. Herbert made friends of his own, and went out with them, and undertook parties of pleasure, and manly expeditions in which Reine had no part. It was very foolish of her to feel it, and no critic could have been more indignant with her than she was with herself. The girl's first sensation was surprise, when she found herself left out. She was bewildered by it. It had never occurred to her as likely, natural, nay, necessary—which, as soon as she recovered her breath, she assured herself it was. Poor Reine even tried to laugh at herself

for her womanish folly. Was it to be expected that Herbert should continue in the same round when he got better, that he should not go out into the world like other men? On the contrary, Reine was proud and delighted to see him go; to feel that he was able for it; to listen to his step, which was as active as any of the others, she thought, and his voice, which rang as clear and gay. It was only after he was gone that the sudden surprise I have spoken of assailed her. And if you will think of it, it was hard upon Reine. Because of her devotion to him she had made no friends for herself. She had been out of the way of wanting friends. Madame de Mirfleur's eagerness to introduce her, to find companions for her, when she paid the pair her passing visits, had always been one of the things which most offended Reine. What did she want with other companions than Herbert? She was necessary to him, and did any one suppose that she would leave him for pleasure? For pleasure! could mamma suppose it would be any pleasure to her to be separate from her brother? Thus the girl thought in her absolute way, carrying matters with a high hand as long as it was in her power to do so. But now that Herbert was well, everything was changed. He was fond of his sister,

who had been so good a nurse to him; but it seemed perfectly natural that she should have been his nurse, and had she not always said she preferred that occupation to anything else in the world? It was just the sort of thing that suited Reine—it was her way, and the way of most good girls. But it did not occur to Herbert to think that there was anything astonishing, any hardship in the matter; nor, when he went out with his new friends, did it come into his head that Reine, all alone, might be dull and miss him. Yes, miss him, that of course she must; but then it was inevitable; a young fellow enjoying his natural liberty could not by any possibility drag a girl about everywhere after him—that was out of the question, of course. At first now and then it would sometimes come into his head that his sister was alone at home, but that impression very soon wore off. She liked it. She said so; and why should she say so if it was not the case? Besides, she could of course have friends if she chose. So shy Reine, who had not been used to any friends but him, who had alienated herself from all her friends for him, stayed at home within the four rather bare walls of their sitting-room, while the sun shone outside, and even the invalids strolled about, and the soft sound of the

sea upon the beach filled the air with a subdued, delicious murmur. Good François, Herbert's faithful attendant, used to entreat her to go out.

"The weather is delightful," he said. "Why will mademoiselle insist upon shutting herself up in-doors?"

"I shall go out presently, François," Reine said, her pretty lips quivering a little.

But she had no one to go out with, poor child. She did not like even to throw herself upon the charity of one or two ladies whom she knew. She knew no one well, and how could she go and thrust herself upon them now, after having received their advances coldly while she had Herbert? So the poor child sat down and read, or tried to read, seated at the window from which she could see the sea and the people who were walking about. How lucky she was to have such a cheerful window! But when she saw the sick English girl who lived close by, going out for her midday walk leaning upon her brother's arm, with her mother by her side, watching her, poor Reine's heart grew sick. Why was it not she who was ill? if she died, nobody would miss her much (so neglected youth always feels, with poignant self-pity), whereas it was evident that the heart of that poor lady would break if her child was taken

from her. The poor lady whom Reine thus noted looked up at her where she sat at the window, with a corresponding pang. Oh, why was it that other girls should be so fresh and blooming while her child was dying? But it is very hard at twenty to sit at a bright window alone, and try to read, while all the world is moving about before your eyes, and the sunshine sheds a soft intoxication of happiness into the air. The book would fall from her hands, and the young blood would tingle in her veins. No doubt, if one of the ladies whom Reine knew had called just then, the girl would have received her visitor with the utmost dignity, nor betrayed by a word, by a look, how lonely she was: for she was proud, and rather perverse, and shy—shy to her very finger-tips; but in her heart I think if any one had been so boldly kind as to force her out, and take her in charge, she would have been ready to kiss that deliverer's feet; but never to own what a deliverance it was.

No one came, however, in this enterprising way. They had been in Cannes several times, the brother and sister, and Reine had been always bound to Herbert's side, finding it impossible to leave him. How could these mere acquaintances know that things were changed now? So she sat at the window most of the

day, sometimes trying to make little sketches, sometimes working, but generally reading or pretending to read —not improving books, dear reader. These young people did not carry much solid literature about with them. They had poetry books—not a good selection —and a supply of the pretty Tauchnitz volumes, only limited by the extent of that enterprising firm's reprints, besides such books as were to be got at the library. Everard had shown more discrimination than was usual to him when he said that Herbert, after his long helplessness and dependence, would rush very eagerly into the enjoyments and freedom of life. It was very natural that he should do so; chained to a sick room as he had been for so long—then indulged with invalid pleasures, invalid privileges, and gradually feeling the tide rise and the warm blood of his youth swell in his veins, the poor young fellow was greedy of freedom, of boyish company, from which he had always been shut out—of adventures, innocent enough, yet to his recluse mind having all the zest of desperate risk and daring. He had no intention of doing anything wrong, or even anything unkind. But this was the very first time that he had fallen among a party of young men like himself, and the contrast being so novel, was delightful to him. And his new friends

"took to him" with a flattering vehemence of liking. They came to fetch him in the morning, they involved him in a hundred little engagements. They were fond of him, he thought, and he had never known friendship before. In short, they turned Herbert's head, a thing which quite commonly happens both to girls and boys when for the first time either boy or girl falls into a merry group of his or her contemporaries, with many amusements and engagements on hand. Had one of these young fellows happened to fall in love with Reine all would have gone well—for then, no doubt, the young lover would have devised ways and means for having her of the party. But she was not encouraging to their advances. Girls who have little outward contact with society are apt to form an uncomfortably high ideal, and Reine thought her brother's friends a pack of noisy boys quite inferior to Herbert, with no intellect, and not very much breeding. She was very dignified and reserved when they ran in and out, calling for him to come here and go there, and treated them as somehow beneath the notice of such a very mature person as herself; and the young fellows were offended, and revenged themselves by adding ten years to her age, and giving her credit for various disagreeable qualities.

"Oh, yes, he has a sister," they would say, "much older than Austin—who looks as if she would like to turn us all out, and keep her darling at her apron-string."

"You must remember she has had the nursing of him all his life," a more charitable neighbour would suggest by way of excusing the middle-aged sister.

"But women ought to know that a man is not to be always lounging about pleasing them, and not himself. Hang it all, what would they have? I wonder Austin don't send her home. It is the best place for her."

This was how the friends commented upon Reine. And Reine did not know that even to be called Austin was refreshing to the invalid lad, showing him that he was at least on equal terms with somebody; and that the sense of independence intoxicated him, so that he did not know how to enjoy it enough—to take draughts full enough and deep enough of the delightful pleasure of being his own master, of meeting the night air without a muffler, and going home late in sheer bravado, to show that he was an invalid no more.

After this first change, which chilled her and made her life so lonely, another change came upon Reine. She had been used to be anxious about Herbert all her

life, and now another kind of anxiety seized her, which a great many women know very well, and which with many becomes a great and terrible passion, ravaging secretly their very lives. Fear for his health slid imperceptibly in her loneliness into fear for *him.* Does the reader know the difference? She was a very ignorant, foolish girl; she did not know anything about the amusements and pleasures of young men. When her brother came in slightly flushed and flighty, with some excitement in his looks, parting loudly with his friends at the door, smelling of cigars and wine, a little rough, a little noisy, poor Reine thought he was plunging into some terrible whirlpool of dissipation, such as she had read of in books; and, as she was of the kind of woman who is subject to its assaults, the vulture came down upon her, there and then, and began to gnaw at her heart. In those long evenings when she sat alone waiting for him, the legendary Spartan with the fox under his cloak was nothing to Reine. She kept quite still over her book, and read page after page, without knowing a word she was reading—but heard the pitiful little clock on the mantel-piece chime the hours, and every step and voice outside, and every sound within, with painful acuteness, as if she were all ear; and felt her

heart beat all over her—in her throat, in her ears, stifling her and stopping her breath. She did not form any idea to herself of how Herbert might be passing his time; she would not let her thoughts accuse him of anything, for, indeed, she was too innocent to imagine those horrors which women often do imagine. But she sat in an agony of listening, waiting for him, wondering how he would look when he returned—wondering if this was him, in an ever-renewed crisis of excitement, this step that was coming—falling dull and dead when the step was past, rousing up again to the next, feeling herself helpless, miserable, a slave to the anguish which dominated her, and against which reason itself could make no stand. Every morning she woke saying to herself that she would not allow herself to be so miserable again, and every night fell back into the clutches of this passion, which griped at her and consumed her. When Herbert came in early and "like himself"—that is to say, with no traces of excitement or levity—the torture would stop in a moment, and a delicious repose would come over her soul; but next night it came back again the same as ever, and poor Reine's struggles to keep mastery of herself were all in vain. There are hundreds of women who will know exactly how she felt, and what

an absorbing fever it was which had seized upon her. She had more reason than she really knew for her fears, for Herbert was playing with his newly acquired health in the rashest way, and though he was doing no great harm, had yet departed totally from that ideal which had been his, as well as his sister's, but a short time before. He had lost altogether the tender gratitude of that moment when he thought he was being cured in a half miraculous, heavenly way, and when his first simple boyish thought was how good, how good it became him to be, to prove the thankfulness of which his heart was full. He had forgotten now about being thankful. He was glad, delighted to be well, and half believed that he had some personal credit in it. He had "cheated the doctors"—it was not they who had cured him, but presumably something great and vigorous in himself which had triumphed over all difficulties; and now he had a right to enjoy himself in proportion to—what he began to think—the self-denial of past years. Both the brother and sister had very much fallen off from that state of elevation above the world which had been temporarily theirs in that wonderful moment at Kandersteg; and they had begun to feel the effect of those drawbacks which every great change brings with

it, even when the change is altogether blessed, and has been looked forward to with hope for years.

This was the position of affairs between the brother and sister when Madame de Mirfleur arrived to pay them a visit, and satisfy herself as to her son's health. She came to them in her most genial mood, happy in Herbert's recovery, and meaning to afford herself a little holiday, which was scarcely the aspect under which her former visits to her elder children had shown themselves. They had received her proposal with very dutiful readiness, but oddly enough, as one of the features of the change, it was Reine who wished for her arrival, not Herbert, though he, in former times, had always been the most charitable to his mother. Now his brow clouded at the prospect. His newborn independence seemed in danger. He felt as if mufflers and respirators, and all the old marks of bondage, were coming back to him in Madame de Mirfleur's trunks.

"If mamma comes with the intention of coddling me up again, and goes on about taking care," he said, "by Jove! I tell you I'll not stand it, Reine."

"Mamma will do what she thinks best," said Reine, perhaps a little coldly; "but you know I think you are

wrong, Bertie, though you will not pay any attention to me."

"You are just like a girl," said Herbert, "never satisfied, never able to see the difference. What a change it is, by Jove, when a fellow gets into the world, and learns the right way of looking at things! If you go and set her on me, I'll never forgive you; as if I could not be trusted to my own guidance—as if it were not I, myself, who was most concerned!"

These speeches of her brother's cost Reine, I am afraid, some tears when he was gone, and her pride yielded to the effects of loneliness and discouragement. He was forsaking her, she thought, who had the most right to be good to her—he of whom she had boasted that he was the only being who belonged to her in the world; her very own, whom nobody could take from her. Poor Reine! it had not required very much to detach him from her. When Madame de Mirfleur arrived, however, she did not interfere with Herbert's newly-formed habits, nor attempt to put any order in his mannish ways. She scolded Reine for moping, for sitting alone and neglecting society, and instantly set about to remedy this fault; but she found Herbert's little dissipations *tout simple*, said not a word about a respi-

rator, and rather encouraged him than otherwise, Reine thought. She made him give them an account of everything where he had been, and all about his expeditions, when he came back at night, and never showed even a shadow of disapproval, laughing at the poor little jokes which Herbert reported, and making the best of his pleasure. She made him ask his friends, of whom Reine disapproved, to dinner, and was kind to them, and charmed these young men; for Madame de Mirfleur had been a beauty in her day, and kept up those arts of pleasing which her daughter disdained, and made Herbert's boyish companions half in love with her. This had the effect of restraining Herbert often, without any suspicions of restraint entering his head; and the girl, who half despised, half envied her mother's power, was not slow to perceive this, though she felt in her heart that nothing could ever qualify her to follow the example. Poor Reine looked on, disapproving her mother as usual, yet feeling less satisfied with herself than usual, and asking herself vainly if she loved Herbert as she thought she did, would not she make any sacrifice to make him happy? If this made him happy, why could not she do it? It was because his companions were his inferiors, she said to herself—com-

panions not worthy of Herbert. How could she stoop to them? Madame de Mirfleur had not such a high standard of excellence. She exerted herself for the amusement of the young men as if they had been heroes and sages. And even Reine, though she disapproved, was happier, against her will.

"But, mon Dieu!" cried Madame de Mirfleur, "the fools that these boys are! Have you ever heard, my Reine, such bêtises as my poor Herbert takes for pleasantries? They give me mal au cœur. How they are bêtes, these boys!"

"I thought you liked them," said Reine, "you are so kind to them. You flatter them, even. Oh does it not wound you, are you not ashamed, to see Bertie, my Bertie, prefer that noise—those scufflings? It is this that gives me mal au cœur."

"Bah! you are high-flown," said the mother. "If one took to heart all the things that men do, one would have no consolation in this world. They are all less or more bêtes, the men. What we have to do is to ménager—to make of it the best we can. You do not expect them to understand—to be like *us?* Tenez, Reine; that which your brother wants is a friend. No, not thee, my child, nor me. Do not cry, chérie. It is

the lot of the woman. Thou hast not known whether thou wert girl or boy, or what difference there was, in the strange life you have led; but listen, my most dear, for now you find it out. Herbert is but like others; he is no worse than the rest. He accepts from thee everything, so long as he wants thee; but now he is independent, he wants thee no more. This is a truth which every woman learns. To struggle is inutile—it does no good, and a woman who is wise accepts what must be, and does not struggle. What he wants is a friend. Where is the cousin, the Monsieur Everard, whom I left with you, who went away suddenly? You have never told me why he went away."

Reine's colour rose. She grew red to the roots of her hair. It was a subject which had never been touched upon between them, and possibly it was the girl's consciousness of something which she could not put into words which made the blood flush to her face. Madame de Mirfleur had been very discreet on this subject, as she always was. She had never done anything to awaken her child's susceptibilities. And she was not ignorant of Everard's story, which Julie had entered upon in much greater detail than would have been possible to Reine. Honestly, she thought no more

of Everard so far as Reine was concerned; but, for Herbert, he would be invaluable; therefore, it was with no match-making meaning that she awaited her daughter's reply.

"I told you when it happened," said Reine, in very measured tones, and with unnecessary dignity; "you have forgotten, mamma. His affairs got into disorder; he thought he had lost all his money; and he was obliged to go at a moment's notice to save himself from being ruined."

"Ah!" said Madame de Mirfleur, "I begin to recollect. Après? He was not ruined, but he did not come back?"

"He did not come back because he had to go to Jamaica—to the West Indies," said Reine, somewhat indignant, "to work hard. It is not long since he has been back in England. I had a letter—to say he thought—of coming——" Here she stopped short, and looked at her mother with a certain defiance. She had not meant to say anything of this letter, but in Everard's defence had betrayed its existence before she knew.

"Ah!" said Madame de Mirfleur, wisely showing little eagerness, "such a one as Everard would be a

good companion for your brother. He is a man, voyez-vous, not a boy. He thought—of coming?"

"Somewhere—for the winter," said Reine, with a certain oracular vagueness, and a tremor in her voice.

"Some-vere," said Madame de Mirfleur, laughing, "that is large; and you replied, ma Reine——?"

"I did not reply—I have not time," said Reine with dignity, "to answer all the idle letters that come to me. People in England seem to think one has nothing to do but to write."

"It is very true," said the mother, "they are foolish, the English, on that point. Give me thy letter, chérie, and I will answer it for thee. I can think of no one who would be so good for Herbert. Probably he will never want a good friend so much as now."

"Mamma!" cried Reine, changing from red to white, and from white to red in her dismay, "you are not going to invite Everard here?"

"Why not, my most dear? It is tout simple; unless thou hast something secret in thy heart against it, which I don't know."

"I have nothing secret in my heart," cried Reine, her heart beating loudly, her eyes filling with tears; "but don't do it—don't do it! I don't want him here."

"Très-bien, my child," said the mother calmly, "it was not for thee, but for thy brother. Is there anything against him?"

"No, no, no! There is nothing against him—nothing!"

"Then you are unreasonable, Reine," said her mother; "but I will not cross you, my child. You are excited—the tears come to you in the eyes; you are not well—you have been too much alone, ma petite Reine."

"No, no; I am quite well—I am not excited!" cried the girl.

Madame de Mirfleur kissed her, and smoothed her hair, and bid her put on her hat and come out.

"Come and listen a little to the sea," she said. "It is soft, like the wind in our trees. I love to take advantage of the air when I am by the sea."

CHAPTER II.

THE effect of this conversation, however, did not end as the talk itself did. Reine thought of little else all the rest of the day. When they got to the beach, Madame de Mirfleur, as was natural, met with some of her friends, and Reine, dropping behind, had leisure enough for her own thoughts. It was one of those lovely, soft, bright days which follow each other for weeks together, even though grim December, on that charmed and peaceful coast. The sea, as blue as a forget-me-not or a child's eyes—less deep in tone than the Austin eyes through which Reine gazed at it, but not less limpid and liquid-bright—played with its pebbles on the beach like a child, rolling them over playfully, and sending the softest hus-sh of delicious sound through air which was full of light and sunshine. It was not too still, but had the refreshment of a tiny breeze, just enough to ruffle the sea-surface where it was shallow, and make edges of undulating shadow upon the shining

sand and pebbles underneath, which the sun changed to gold. The blue sky to westward was turning into a great blaze of rose, through which its native hue shone in bars and breaks, here turning to purple and crimson, here cooling down to the wistfullest shadowy green. As close to the sea as it could keep its footing, a noble stone pine stood on a little height, rising like a great stately brown pillar, to spread its shade between the young spectator and the setting sun. Behind, not a stone's throw from where she stood, rose the line of villas among their trees, and all the soft lively movement of the little town. How different from the scenes which Everard's name conjured up before Reine—the soft English landscape of Whiteladies, the snowy peaks and wild, sweet pastures of the Alpine valleys where they had been last together! Madame de Mirfleur felt that it would not harm her daughter to leave her time for thought. She was too far-seeing to worry her with interference, or to stop the germination of the seeds she had herself sown; and having soothed Reine by the influences of the open air and the sea, she had no objection to leave her alone, and permit the something which was evidently in her mind, whatever it was, to work. Madame de Mirfleur was not only concerned about her

daughter's happiness from a French point of view, feeling that the time was come when it would be right to marry her; but she was also solicitous about her condition in other ways. It might not be for Reine's happiness to continue much longer with Herbert, who was emancipating himself very quickly from his old bonds, and probably would soon find the sister who, a year ago, had been indispensable to him, to be a burden and drag upon his freedom, in the career of manhood he was entering upon so eagerly. And where was Reine to go to? Madame de Mirfleur could not risk taking her to Normandy, where, delightful as that home was, her English child would not be happy; and she had a mother's natural reluctance to abandon her altogether to the old aunts at Whiteladies, who, as rival guardians to her children in their youth, had naturally taken the aspect of rivals and enemies to their mother. No; it would have been impossible in France that an *affaire du cœur* should have dragged on so long as that between Everard and Reine must have done, if indeed there was anything in it. But there was never any understanding those English, and if Reine's looks meant anything, surely this was what they meant. At all events, it was well that Reine should have an opportunity of thinking it well

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over; and if there was nothing in it, at least it would be good for Herbert to have the support and help of his cousin. Therefore, in whatever light you chose to view the subject, it was important that Everard should be here. So she left her daughter undisturbed to think, in peace, what it was best to do.

And indeed it was a sufficiently difficult question to come to any decision upon. There was no quarrel between Reine and Everard, nor any reason why they should regard each other in any but a kind and cousinly way. Such a *rapprochement*, and such a curious break as had occurred between them, are not at all uncommon. They had been very much thrown together, and brought insensibly to the very verge of an alliance more close and tender; but before a word had been said, before any decisive step had been taken, Fate came in suddenly and severed them, "at a moment's notice," as Reine said, leaving no time, no possibility for any explanation or any pledge. I do not know what was in Everard's heart at the moment of parting, whether he had ever fully made up his mind to make the sacrifices which would be necessary should he marry, or whether his feelings had gone beyond all such prudential considerations; but anyhow, the summons which surprised him so suddenly

was of a nature which made it impossible for him in honour to do anything or say anything which should compromise Reine. For it was loss of fortune, perhaps total—the first news being exaggerated, as so often happens—with which he was threatened; and in the face of such news, honour sealed his lips, and he dared not trust himself to say a word beyond the tenderness of good-bye which his relationship permitted. He went away from her with suppressed anguish in his heart, feeling like a man who had suddenly fallen out of paradise down, down to the commonest earth—but silenced himself, and subdued himself by hard pressure of necessity till time and the natural influences of distance and close occupation dulled the poignant feeling with which he had said that good-bye. The woman has the worst of it in such circumstances. She is left, which always seems the inferior part, and always is the hardest to bear, in the same scene, with everything to recall to her what has been, and nothing to justify her in dwelling upon the tender recollection. I do not know why it should appear to women, universally, something to be ashamed of when they give love unasked—or even when they give it in return for every kind of asking except the straightforward and final words. It is no shame to a

man to do so; but these differences of sentiment are inexplicable, and will not bear accounting for. Reine felt that she had "almost" given her heart and deepest affections, without being asked for them. She had not, it is true, committed herself in words, any more than he had done; but she believed with sore shame that *he* knew—just as he felt sure (but without shame) that *she* knew; though in truth neither of them knew even their own feelings, which on both sides had changed somewhat, without undergoing any fundamental alteration. Such meetings and partings are not uncommon. Sometimes the two thus rent asunder at the critical moment, never meet again at all, and the incipient romance dies in the bud, leaving (very often) a touch of bitterness in the woman's heart, a sense of incompleteness in the man's. Sometimes the two meet when age has developed or altered them, and when they ask themselves with horror what they could possibly have seen in that man or that woman? And sometimes they meet again voluntarily or involuntarily, and—that happens which pleases Heaven; for it is impossible to predict the termination of such an interrupted tale.

Reine had not found it very easy to piece that broken bit of her life into the web again. She had never said a

word to any one, never allowed herself to speak to herself of what she felt; but it had not been easy to bear. Honour, too, like everything else, takes a different aspect as it is regarded by man or woman. Everard had thought that honour absolutely sealed his lips from the moment that he knew, or rather believed, that his fortune was gone; but Reine would have been infinitely more ready to give him her fullest trust, and would have felt an absolute gratitude to him had he spoken out of his poverty, and given her the pleasure of sympathizing, of consoling, of adding her courage and constancy to his. She was too proud to have allowed herself to think that there was any want of honour in the way he left her, for Reine would have died rather than have had the pitiful tribute of a declaration made for honour's sake; but yet, had it not been her case, but a hypothetical one, she would have pronounced it to be most honourable to speak, while the man would have felt a single word inconsistent with his honour! So we must apparently go on misunderstanding each other till the end of time. It was a case in which there was a great deal to be said on both sides, the reader will perceive. But all this was over; and the two whom a word might have made one were quite free, quite independent, and might

each have married some one else had they so chosen, without the other having a word to say; and yet they could not meet without a certain embarrassment, without a sense of what might have been. They were not lovers, and they were not indifferent to each other, and on both sides there was just a little wholesome bitterness. Reine, though far too proud to own it, had felt herself forsaken. Everard, since his return from the active work which had left him little time to think, had felt himself slighted. She had said that, now Herbert was better, it was not worth while writing so often! and when he had got over that unkind speech, and had written, as good as offering himself to join them, she had not replied. He had written in October, and now it was nearly Christmas, and she had never replied. So there was, the reader will perceive, a most hopeful and promising grievance on both sides. Reine turned over her part of it deeply and much in her mind that night, after the conversation with her mother which I have recorded. She asked herself, had she any right to deprive Herbert of a friend who would be of use to him for any foolish pride of hers? She could keep herself apart very easily, Reine thought, in her pride. She was no longer very necessary to Herbert. He did not want

her as he used to do. She could keep apart, and trouble no one; and why should she, for any ridiculous self-consciousness, ghost of sentiment dead and gone, deprive her brother of such a friend? She said "No!" to herself vehemently, as she lay and pondered the question in the dark, when she ought to have been asleep. Everard was nothing, and could be nothing to her, but her cousin; it would be necessary to see him as such but not to see much of him; and whatever he might be else, he was a gentleman, and would never have the bad taste to intrude upon her if he saw she did not want him. Besides, there was no likelihood that he would wish it; therefore Reine made up her mind that no exaggerated sentimentality on her part, no weak personal feeling, should interfere with Herbert's good. She would keep herself out of the way.

But the reader will scarcely require to be told that the letter written under this inspiration was not exactly the kind of letter which it flatters a young man to receive from a girl to whom he has once been so closely drawn as Everard had been to Reine, and to whom he still feels a visionary link, holding him fast in spite of himself. He received the cold epistle, in which Reine informed him simply where they were, adding a message from her

brother: "If you are coming to the Continent, Herbert wishes me to say he would be glad to see you here," in a scene and on a day which was as unlike as it is possible to imagine to the soft Italian weather, and genial southern beach, on which Reine had concocted it. As it happened, the moment was one of the most lively and successful in Everard's somewhat calm country life. He, who often felt himself insignificant, and sometimes slighted, was for that morning at least in the ascendant. Very cold weather had set in suddenly, and in cold weather Everard became a person of great importance in his neighbourhood. I will tell you why. His little house, which was on the river, as I have already said, and in summer a very fine starting-point for water-parties, possessed unusually picturesque and well-planted grounds; and in the heart of a pretty bit of plantation which belonged to him was an ornamental piece of water, very prettily surrounded by trees and sloping lawns, which froze quickly, as the water was shallow, and was the pleasantest skating-ground for miles round. Need I say more to show how a frost made Everard instantly a man of consequence? On the day on which Reine's epistle arrived at Water Beeches, which was the name of his place, it was a beautiful English frost, such

as we see but rarely nowadays. I do not know whether there is really any change of the climate, or whether it is only the change of one's own season from spring to autumn which gives an air of change even to the weather; but I do not think there are so many bright, crisp, clear frosts as there used to be. Nor, perhaps, is it much to be regretted that the intense cold—which may be as champagne to the healthy and comfortable, but is death to the sick and misery to the poor—should be less common than formerly. It was, however, a brilliant frosty day at the Water Beeches, and a large party had come over to enjoy the pond. The sun was shining red through the leafless trees, and such of them as had not encountered his direct influence were still encased in fairy garments of rime, feathery and white to the furthest twig. The wet grass was brilliantly green, and lighted up in the sun's way with sparkling water-diamonds, though in the shade it too was crisp and white with frost, and crackled under your feet. On the broad path at one end of the pond two or three older people, who did not skate, were walking briskly up and down, stamping their feet to keep them warm, and hurrying now and then in pairs to the house, which was just visible through the trees, to get warmed by the fire.

But on the ice no one was cold. The girls, with their red petticoats and red feathers, and pretty faces flushed with the exercise, were, some of them, gliding about independently with their hands in their muffs, some of them being conducted about by their attendants, some dashing along in chairs wheeled by a chivalrous skater. They had just come out again, after a merry luncheon, stimulated by the best fare Everard's housekeeper could furnish, and by Everard's best champagne; and as the afternoon was now so short, and the sun sinking low, the gay little crowd was doing all it could to get an hour's pleasure out of half an hour's time, and the scene was one of perpetual movement, constant varying and intermingling of the bright-coloured groups, and a pleasant sound of talk and laughter which rang through the clear air and the leafless trees. The few chaperons who waited upon the pleasure of these young ladies were getting tired and chilled, and perhaps cross, as was (I think) extremely natural, and wishing for their carriages; but the girls were happy, and not cross, and all of them very agreeable to Everard, who was the cause of so much pleasure. Sophy and Kate naturally took upon them to do the honours of their cousin's place. Everybody knows what a moveable relationship cousinry is,

and how it recedes and advances according to the inclination of the moment. To-day, the Farrel-Austins felt themselves first-cousins to Everard, his next-of-kin, so to speak, and comparative owners. They showed their friends the house and the grounds, and all the pretty openings and peeps of the river. "It is small, but it is a perfect little place," they said with all the pride of proprietorship. "What fun we have had here! It is delightful for boating. We have the jolliest parties!"

"In short, I don't know such a place for fun all the year round," cried Sophy.

"And of course, being so closely related, it is just like our own," said Kate. "We can bring whom we like here."

It was with the sound of all these pretty things in his ears, and all the pleasant duties of hospitality absorbing his attention, with pleasant looks, and smiles, and compliments about his house and his table coming to him on all sides, and a sense of importance thrust upon him in the most delightful way, that Everard had Reine's letter put into his hand. It was impossible that he could read it then; he put it into his pocket with a momentary flutter and tremor of his heart, and went

on with the entertainment of his guests. All the afternoon he was in motion, flying about upon the ice, where, for he was a very good skater, he was in great demand, and where his performances were received with great applause; then superintending the muster of the carriages, putting his pretty guests into them, receiving thanks and plaudits, and gay good-byes "for the present." There was to be a dance at the Hatch that night, where most of the party were to reassemble, and Everard felt himself sure of the prettiest partners, and the fullest consideration of all his claims to notice and kindness. He had never been more pleased with himself, nor in a more agreeable state of mind towards the world in general, than when he shut the door of his cousins' carriage, which was the last to leave.

"Mind you come early. I want to settle with you about next time," said Kate.

"And Evf," cried Sophy, leaning out of the carriage, "bring me those barberries you promised me for my hair."

Everard stood smiling, waving his hand to them as they drove away. "Madcaps!" he said to himself, "always with something on hand!" as he went slowly home, watching the last red gleam of the sun disappear

behind the trees. It was getting colder and colder every moment, the chilliest of December nights; but the young man in his glow of exercise and pleasure, did not take any notice of this. He went into his cosy little library, where a bright fire was burning, and where, even in his own particular sanctum, the disturbing presence of those gay visitors was apparent. They had taken down some of his books from his shelves, and they had scattered the cushions of his sofa round the fire, where a circle of them had evidently been seated. There is a certain amused curiosity in a young man's thoughts as to the doings and the sayings, when by themselves, of those mysterious creatures called girls. What were they talking about while they chattered round that fire? *his* fire, where, somehow, some subtle difference in the atmosphere betokened their recent presence? He sat down with a smile on his face, and that flattered sense of general importance and acceptability in his mind, and took Reine's letter out of his pocket. It was perhaps not the most suitable state of mind in which to read the chilly communication of Reine.

Its effect upon him, however, was not at all chilly. It made him hot with anger. He threw it down on the table when he had read it, feeling such a letter to be

an insult. Go to Cannes to be of use, forsooth, to Herbert! a kind of sick-nurse, he supposed, or perhaps keeper, now that he could go out, to the inexperienced young fellow. Everard bounced up from his comfortable chair, and began to walk up and down the room in his indignation. Other people nearer home had better taste than Reine. If she thought that he was to be whistled to, like a dog when he was wanted, she was mistaken. Not even when he was wanted;—it was clear enough that she did not want him, cold, uncourteous, unfriendly as she was! Everard's mind rose like an angry sea, and swelled into such a ferment that he could not subdue himself. A mere acquaintance would have written more civilly, more kindly, would have thought it necessary at least to appear to join in the abrupt, cold, semi-invitation, which Reine transmitted as if she had nothing to do with it. Even her mother (a wise woman, with some real knowledge of the world, and who knew when a man was worth being civil to!) had perceived the coldness of the letter, and added a conciliatory postscript. Everard was wounded and humiliated in his moment of success and flattered vanity, when he was most accessible to such a wound. And he was quite incapable of divining—as probably he

would have done in any one else's case, but as no man seems capable of doing in his own—that Reine's coldness was the best of all proof that she was not indifferent, and that something must lie below the studied chill of such a composition. He dressed for the party at the Hatch in a state of mind which I will not attempt to describe, but of which his servant gave a graphic account to the housekeeper.

"Summat's gone agin master," that functionary said. "He have torn those gardenias all to bits as was got for his button-hole; and the lots of ties as he've spiled is enough to bring tears to your eyes. Some o' them there young ladies has been a misconducting theirselves; or else it's the money market. But I don't think it's money," said John; "when it's money gentlemen is low, not furious, like to knock you down."

"Get along with you, do," said the housekeeper. "We don't want no ladies here!"

"That may be, or it mayn't be," said John; "but something's gone agin master. Listen! there he be, a rampaging because the dog-cart ain't come round, which I hear the wheels, and William—it's his turn, and I'll just keep out o' the way."

William was of John's opinion when they compared

notes after. Master drove to the Hatch like mad, the groom said. He had never been seen to look so black in all his life before, for Everard was a peaceable soul in general, and rather under the dominion of his servants. He was, however, extremely gay at the Hatch and danced more than any one, far outstripping the languid Guardsmen in his exertions, and taking all the pains in the world to convince himself that, though some people might show a want of perception of his excellences, there were others who had a great deal more discrimination. Indeed, his energy was so vehement, that two or three young ladies, including Sophy, found it necessary to pause and question themselves on the subject, wondering what sudden charm on their part had warmed him into such sudden exhibitions of feeling.

"It will not answer at all," Sophy said to her sister; "for I don't mean to marry Everard, for all the skating and all the boating in the world—not now, at least. Ten years hence, perhaps, one might feel different—but now!—and I don't want to quarrel with him either, in case——" said this far-seeing young woman.

This will show how Reine's communication excited and stimulated her cousin, though perhaps in a curious way.

CHAPTER III.

EVERARD'S excited mood, however, did not last; perhaps he danced out some of his bitterness; violent exercise is good for all violent feeling, and calms it down. He came to himself with a strange shock, when—one of the latest to leave, as he had been one of the earliest to go—he came suddenly out from the lighted rooms, and noisy music, and chattering voices, to the clear cold wintry moonlight, deep in the frosty night, or rather early on the frosty morning of the next day. There are some people who take to themselves, in our minds at least, a special phase of nature, and plant their own image in the midst of it with a certain arrogance, so that we cannot dissociate the sunset from one of those usurpers, or the twilight from another. In this way Reine had taken possession of the moonlight for Everard. It was no doing of hers, nor was she aware of it; but still it was the case. He never saw the moon shining without remembering the little balcony at Kan-

dersteg, and the whiteness with which her head rose out of the dark shadow of the rustic wooden framework. How could he help but think of her now, when worn out by a gaiety which had not been quite real, he suddenly fell, as it were, into the silence, the clear white light, the frost-bound chill, cold blue skies above him, full of frosty, yet burning stars, and the broad level shining of that ice-cold moon? Everard, like other people at his time of life, and in his somewhat unsettled condition of mind, had a way of feeling somewhat "low" after being very gay. It is generally the imaginative who do this, and is a sign, I think, of a higher nature; but Everard had the disadvantage of it without the good, for he was not of a poetical mind—though I suppose there must have been enough poetry in him to produce the reaction. When it came on, as it always did after the noisy gaiety of the Hatch, he had, in general, one certain refuge to which he always betook himself. He thought of Reine—Reine, who was gay enough, had nature permitted her to have her way, but whom love had separated from everything of the kind, and transplanted into solitude and quiet, and the moonlight, which, in his mind, was dedicated to her image; this was his resource when he was "low;" and he turned

to it as naturally as the flowers turn to the sun. Reine was his imagination, his land of fancy, his unseen world, to Everard; but lo! on the very threshold of this secret region of dreams, the young man felt himself pulled up and stopped short. Reine's letter rolled itself forth before him like a black curtain shutting out his visionary refuge. Had he lost her? he asked himself, with a sudden thrill of visionary panic. Her image had embodied all poetry, all romance, to him, and had it fled from his firmament? The girls whom he had left had no images at all, so to speak; they were flesh and blood realities, pleasant enough, so long as you were with them, and often very amusing to Everard, who, after he had lingered in their society till the last moment, had that other to fall back upon—that other, whose superiority he felt as soon as he got outside the noisy circle, and whose soft influence, oddly enough, seemed to confer a superiority upon him, who had her in that private sphere to turn to, when he was tired of the rest. Nothing could be sweeter than the sense of repose and moral elevation with which, for instance, after a gay and amusing and successful day like this, he went back into the other world, which he had the privilege of possessing, and felt once more the mountain air

breathe over him, fresh with the odour of the pines, and saw the moon rising behind the snowy peaks, which were as white as her own light, and that soft, upturned face lifted to the sky, full of tender thoughts and mysteries! If Reine forsook him, what mystery would be left in the world for Everard? what shadowy world, unrealised, and sweeter for being unrealised than any fact could ever be? The poor young fellow was seized with a chill of fright, which penetrated to the marrow of his bones, and froze him doubly this cold night. What it would be to lose one's imagination! to have no dreams left, no place which they could inhabit! Poor Everard felt himself turned out of his refuge, turned out into the cold, the heavenly doors closed upon him all in a moment; and he could not bear it. William, who thought his master had gone out of his mind, or fallen asleep—for what but unconsciousness or insanity could justify the snail's pace into which they had dropped?—felt frozen on his seat behind; but he was not half so frozen as poor Everard, in his Ulster, whose heart was colder than his hands, and through whose very soul these shiverings ran.

Next morning, as was natural, Everard endeavoured to make a stand against the dismay which had taken possession of him, and succeeded for a short time, as

long as he was fully occupied and amused, during which time he felt himself angry, and determined that he was a very badly-used man. This struggle he kept up for about a week, and did not answer Reine's letter. But at last the conflict was too much for him. One day he rode over suddenly to Whiteladies, and informed them that he was going abroad for the rest of the winter. He had nothing to do at Water Beeches, and country life was dull; he thought it possible that he might pass through Cannes on his way to Italy, as that was, on the whole, in winter, the pleasantest way, and, of course, would see Herbert. But he did not mention Reine at all, nor her letter, and gave no reason for his going, except caprice, and the dulness of the country. "I have not an estate to manage like you," he said to Miss Susan; and to Augustine, expressed his grief that he could not be present at the consecration of the Austin Chantry, which he had seen on his way white and bristling with gothic pinnacles, like a patch upon the greyness of the old church. Augustine, whom he met on the road, with her grey hood over her head, and her hands folded in her sleeves, was roused out of her abstracted calm to a half displeasure. "Mr. Farrel-Austin will be the only representative of the family, except ourselves,"

she said; "not that I dislike them, as Susan does. I hope I do not dislike any one," said the Grey sister. "You can tell Herbert, if you see him, that I would have put off the consecration till his return—but why should I rob the family of four months' prayers? That would be sinful waste, Everard; the time is too short—too short—to lose a day."

This was the only message he had to carry. As for Miss Susan, her chief anxiety was that he should say nothing about Giovanna. "A hundred things may happen before May," the elder sister said, with such an anxious worried look as went to Everard's heart. "I don't conceal from you that I don't want her to stay."

"Then send her away," he said lightly. Miss Susan shook her head; she went out to the gate with him, crossing the lawn, though it was damp, to whisper once again, "Nothing about *her*—say nothing about her—a hundred things may happen before May."

Everard left home about ten days after the arrival of Reine's letter, which he did not answer. He could make it evident that he was offended, at least in that way; and he lingered on the road to show, if possible, that he had no eagerness in obeying the summons. His

silence puzzled the household at Cannes. Madame de Mirfleur, with a twist of the circumstances which is extremely natural, and constantly occurring among ladies, set it down as her daughter's fault. She forgave Everard, but she blamed Reine. And with much skilful questioning, which was almost entirely ineffectual, she endeavoured to elicit from Herbert what the state of affairs between these two had been. Herbert, for his part, had not an idea on the subject. He could not understand how it was possible that Everard could quarrel with Reine. "She is aggravating sometimes," he allowed, "when she looks at you like this—I don't know how to describe it—as if she meant to find you out. Why should she try to find a fellow out? a man (as she ought to know) is not like a pack of girls."

"Precisely," said Madame de Mirfleur, "but perhaps that is difficult for our poor Reine—till lately thou wert a boy, and sick, mon 'Erbert; you forget. Women are dull, my son; and this is perhaps one of the things that it is most hard for them to learn."

"You may say so, indeed," said Herbert, "unintelligible beings!—till they come to your age, mamma, when you seem to begin to understand. It is all very well for girls to give an account of themselves. What I am

surprised at is, that they do not perceive at once the fundamental difference. Reine is a clever girl, and it just shows the strange limitation, even of the cleverest; now I don't call myself a clever man—I have had a great many disadvantages—but *I* can perceive at a glance——"

Madame de Mirfleur was infinitely disposed to laugh, or to box her son's ears; but she was one of those women—of whom there are many in the world—who think it better not to attempt the use of reason, but to ménager the male creatures whom they study so curiously. Both the sexes, indeed, I think, have about the same opinion of each other, though the male portion of the community found the means of uttering theirs sooner than the other, and have got it stereotyped, so to speak. We both think each other "inaccessible to reason," and ring the changes upon humouring and coaxing the natural adversary. Madame de Mirfleur thought she knew men *au fond*, and it was not her practice to argue with them. She did not tell Herbert that his mental superiority was not so great as he thought it. She only smiled, and said gently, "It is much more facile to perceive the state of affairs when it is to our own advantage, mon fils. It is that which

gives your eyes so much that is clear. Reine, who is a girl, who has not the same position, it is natural she should not like so much to acknowledge herself to see it. But she could not demand from Everard that he should account for himself. And she will not of you when she has better learned to know—— "

"From Everard? Everard is of little importance. I was thinking of myself," cried Herbert. "How fortunate it is for me that you have come here! I should not have believed that Reine could be sulky. I am fond of her, of course; but I cannot drag a girl everywhere about with me. Is it reasonable? Women should understand their place. I am sure you do, mamma. It is home that is a woman's sphere. She cannot move about the world, or see all kinds of life, or penetrate everywhere, like a man; and it would not suit her if she could," said Herbert, twisting the soft down of his moustache. He was of opinion that it was best for a man to take his place, and show at once that he did not intend to submit to any inquisition; and this, indeed, was what his friends advised, who warned him against petticoat government. "If you don't mind they'll make a slave of you," the young men said. And Herbert was determined to give all who had plans of

this description fair notice. He would not allow himself to be made a slave.

"You express yourself with your usual good sense, my son," said Madame de Mirfleur. "Yes, the home is the woman's sphere; always I have tried to make this known to my Reine. Is it that she loves the world? I make her enter there with difficulty. No, it is you she loves, and understands not to be separated. She has given up the pleasures that are natural to be with you when you were ill; and she understands not to be separated now."

"Bah!" said Herbert, "that is the usual thing which I understand all women say to faire valoir their little services. What has she given up? They would not have been pleasures to her while I was ill; and she ought to understand. It comes back to what I said, mamma. Reine is a clever girl, as girls go—and I am not clever, that I know of; but the thing which she cannot grasp is quite clear to me. It is best to say no more about it—*you* can understand reason, and explain to her what I mean."

"Yes, chéri," said Madame de Mirfleur submissively; then she added, "Monsieur Everard left you at Appenzell? Was he weary of the quiet? or had he cause to go?"

"Why, he had lost his money, and had to look after it —or he thought he had lost his money. Probably, too, he found it slow. There was nobody there, and I was not good for much in those days. He had to be content with Reine. Perhaps he thought she was not much company for him," said the young man, with a sentiment not unusual in young men towards their sisters. His mother watched him with a curious expression. Madame de Mirfleur was in her way a student of human nature, and though it was her son who made these revelations, she was amused by them all the same, and rather encouraged him than otherwise to speak his mind. If she said nothing in defence of Reine, this did not mean that she was deceived in respect to her daughter, or took Herbert's view of the matter. But she wanted to hear all he had to say, and for the moment she looked upon him more as a typical representative of man, than as himself, a creature in whose credit she, his mother, was concerned.

"It has appeared to you that this might be the reason why he went away?"

"I never thought much about it," said Herbert. "I had enough to do thinking of myself. So I have now; I don't care to go into Everard's affairs. If he likes to

come, he'll come, I suppose; and if he don't like, he won't—that's all about it—that's how I would act if it was me. Hallo! why, while we're talking, here he is! Look here—in that carriage at the door!"

"Ah! make my excuses, Herbert. I go to speak to François about a room for him," said Madame de Mirfleur. What she did, in fact, was to dart into her own room, where Reine was sitting at work on some article of dress. Julie had much to do, looking after and catering for the little party, so that Reine had to make herself useful, and do things occasionally for herself.

"Chérie," said her mother, stooping over her, "thy cousin is come—he is at the door. I thought it best to tell you before you met him. For my part, I never like to be taken at the unforeseen—I prefer to be prepared."

Reine had stopped her sewing for the moment; now she resumed it—so quietly that her mother could scarcely make out whether this news was pleasant to her or not. "I have no preparation to make," she said coldly; but her blood was not so much under mastery as her tongue, and rushed in a flood to her face; her fingers, too, stumbled, her needle pricked her, and Madame de Mirfleur, watching, learned something at

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last—which was that Reine was not so indifferent as she said.

"Me, I am not like you, my child," she said. "My little preparations are always necessary—for example, I cannot see the cousin in my robe de chambre. Julie! quick!—but you, as you are ready, can go and salute him. It is to-day, is it not, that we go to see milady Northcote, who will be kind to you when I am gone away? I will put on my black silk; but you, my child, you who are English, who have always your toilette made from the morning, go, if you will, and see the cousin. There is no one but Herbert there."

"Mamma," said Reine, "I heard Herbert say something when I passed the door a little while ago. It was something about me. What has happened to him that he speaks so?—that he thinks so? Has he changed altogether from our Herbert who loved us? Is that common? Oh, must it be? must it be?"

"Mon Dieu!" cried the mother, "can I answer for all that a foolish boy will say? Men are fools, ma Reine; they pretend to be wise, and they are fools. But we must not say this—no one says it, though we all know it in our hearts. Tranquillise thyself; when he is older he will know better. It is not worth thy

while to remember what he says. Go to the cousin, ma Reine."

"I do not care for the cousin. I wish he were not here. I wish there was no one—no one but ourselves; ourselves! that does not mean anything, now," cried Reine, indignant and broken-hearted. The tears welled up into her eyes. She did not take what she had heard so calmly as her mother had done. She was sore and mortified, and wounded and cut to the heart.

"Juste ciel!" cried Madame de Mirfleur, "thy eyes! you will have red eyes if you cry. Julie, fly towards my child—think not more of me. Here is the eau de rose to bathe them; and, quick, some drops of the eau de fleur d'oranger. I never travel without it, as you know."

"I do not want any fleur d'oranger, nor eau de rose. I want to be as once we were, when we were fond of each other, when we were happy, when, if I watched him, Bertie knew it was for love, and nobody came between us!" cried the girl. Impossible to tell how sore her heart was, when it thus burst forth—sore because of what she had heard, sore with neglect, and excitement, and expectation, and mortification, which, all together, were more than Reine could bear.

"You mean when your brother was sick?" said Madame de Mirfleur. "You would not like him to be ill again, chérie. They are like that, ma Reine—unkind, cruel, except when they want us, and then we must not be absent for a moment. But, Reine, I hope thou art not so foolish as to expect sense from a boy; they are not like *us;* they have no understanding; and if thou wouldst be a woman, not always a child, thou must learn to support it, and say nothing. Come, my most dear, my toilette is made, and thy eyes are not so red, after all—eyes of blue do not show like the others. Come, and we will say Bon jour to the cousin, who will think it strange to see neither you nor me."

"Stop—stop but one moment, mamma," cried Reine. She caught her mother's dress, and her hand, and held her fast. The girl was profoundly excited, her eyes were not red, but blazing, and her tears dried. She had been tried beyond her powers of bearing. "Mamma," she cried, "I want to go home with you—take me with you! If I have been impatient, forgive me. I will try to do better, indeed I will. You love me a little—oh, I know only a little, not as I want you to love me! But I should be good; I should try to please you and—every one, ma mère! Take me home with you!"

"Reine, chérie! Yes, my most dear, if you wish it. We will talk of it after. You excite yourself; you make yourself unhappy, my child."

"No, no, no," she cried; "it is not I! I never should have dreamt of it—that Herbert could think me a burden, think me intrusive, interfering, disagreeable! I cannot bear it! Ah, perhaps it is my fault that people are so unkind! Perhaps I am what he says. But, mamma, I will be different with you; take me with you. I will be your maid, your bonne, anything! only don't leave me here!"

"My Reine," said Madame de Mirfleur, touched, but somewhat embarrassed, "you shall go with me, do not doubt it—if it pleases you to go. You are my child as much as Babette, and I love you just the same. A mother has not one measure of love for one and another for another. Do not think it, chérie. You shall go with me if you wish it, but you must not be so angry with Herbert. What are men? I have told you often they are not like us; they seek what they like, and their own way, and their own pleasures; in short, they are fools, as the selfish always are. Herbert is ungrateful to thee for giving up thy youth to him, and thy brightest years; but he is not so unkind as he seems—that which he said

was not what he thinks. You must forgive him, ma Reine; he is ungrateful——"

"Do I wish him to be grateful?" said the girl. "If one gives me a flower, I am grateful, or a glass of water; but gratitude—from Herbert—to me! Do not let us talk of it, for I cannot bear it. But since he does not want me, and finds me a trouble—mother, mother, take me home with you!"

"Yes, chérie, yes; it shall be as you will," said Madame de Mirfleur, drawing Reine's throbbing head on to her bosom, and soothing her as if she had been still a child. She consoled her with soft words, with caresses, and tender tones. Probably she thought it was a mere passing fancy, which would come to nothing; but she had never crossed any of her children, and she soothed and petted Reine instinctively, assenting to all she asked, though without attaching to what she asked any very serious meaning. She took her favourite essence of orange flowers from her dressing-case, and made the agitated girl swallow some of it, and bathed her eyes with rose-water, and kissed and comforted her. "You shall do what pleases to you, ma bien-aimée," she said. "Dry thy dear eyes, my child, and let us go to salute the cousin. He will think something is wrong

He will suppose he is not welcome; and we are not like men, who are a law to themselves; we are women, and must do what is expected—what is reasonable. Come, chérie; or he will think we avoid him, and that something has gone wrong."

Thus adjured, Reine followed her mother to the sitting-room, where Everard had exhausted everything he had to say to Herbert, and everything that Herbert had to say to him; and where the two young men were waiting very impatiently, and with a growing sense of injury for the appearance of the ladies, Herbert exclaimed fretfully that they had kept him waiting half the morning, as they came in. "And here is Everard, who is still more badly used," he cried; "after a long journey too. You need not have made toilettes, surely, before you came to see Everard; but ladies are all the same everywhere, I suppose!"

Reine's eyes gave forth a gleam of fire. "Everywhere!" she cried, "always troublesome, and in the way. It is better to be rid of them. I think so as well as you."

Everard, who was receiving the salutations and apologies of Madame de Mirfleur, did not hear this little speech; but he saw the fire in Reine's eyes, which

lighted up her proud sensitive face. This was not his Reine of the moonlight, whom he had comforted. And he took her look as addressed to himself, though it was not meant for him. She gave him her hand with proud reluctance. He had lost her then? it was as he thought.

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CHAPTER IV.

REINE did not go back from her resolution ; she did not change her mind as her mother expected, and forgive Herbert's *étourderie.* Reine could not look upon it as *étourderie*, and she was too deeply wounded to recover the shock easily ; but I think she had the satisfaction of giving an almost equal shock to her brother, who, though he talked so about the limitation of a girl's understanding, and the superiority of his own, was as much wounded as Reine was, when he found that his sister really meant to desert him. He did not say a word to her, but he denounced to his mother the insensibility of women, who only cared for a fellow so long as he did exactly what they wished, and could not endure him to have the least little bit of his own way. "I should never have heard anything of this if I had taken her about with me everywhere, and gone to bed at ten o'clock, as she wished," he cried, with bitterness.

"You have reason, mon 'Erbert," said Madame de

Mirfleur; "had you cared for her society, she would never have left you; but it is not amusing to sit at home while les autres are amusing themselves. One would require to be an angel for that."

"I never thought Reine cared for amusement," said Herbert; "she never said so; she was always pleased to be at home; it must all have come on, her love for gaiety, to spite me."

Madame de Mirfleur did not reply; she thought it wisest to say nothing in such a controversy, having, I fear, a deep-rooted contempt for the masculine understanding in such matters at least. *En revanche*, she professed the most unbounded reverence for it in other matters, and liked, as Miss Susan did, to consult "a man" in all difficult questions, though I fear, like Miss Susan, it was only the advice of one who agreed with her that she took. But with Herbert she was silent. What was the use? she said to herself. If he could not see that Reine's indifference to amusement arose from her affection to himself, what could she say to persuade him of it? and it was against her principles to denounce him for selfishness, as probably an English mother would have done. "Que voulez-vous? it is their nature," Madame de Mirfleur would have said, shrugging her

shoulders. I am not sure, however, that this silence was much more satisfactory to Herbert than an explanation would have been. He was not really selfish, perhaps, only deceived by the perpetual homage that had been paid to him during his illness, and by the intoxicating sense of sudden emancipation now.

As for Everard, he was totally dismayed by the announcement; all the attempts at self-assertion which he had intended to make failed him. As was natural, he took this, not in the least as affecting Herbert, but only as a pointed slight addressed to himself. He had left home to please her at Christmas, of all times in the year, when everybody who has a home goes back to it, when no one is absent who can help it. And though her invitation was no invitation, and was not accompanied by one conciliating word, he had obeyed the summons, almost, he said to himself, at a moment's notice; and she for whom he came, though she had not asked him, she had withdrawn herself from the party! Everard said to himself that he would not stay, that he would push on at once to Italy, and prove to her that it was not her or her society that had tempted him. He made up his mind to this at once, but he did not do it. He lingered next day and next day again. He

thought it would be best not to commit himself to anything till he had talked to Reine; if he had but half an hour's conversation with her he would be able to see whether it was her mother's doing. A young man in such circumstances has an instinctive distrust of a mother. Probably it was one of Madame de Mirfleur's absurd French notions. Probably she thought it not entirely *comme il faut* that Reine, now under her brother's guardianship, should be attended by Everard. Ridiculous! but on the whole it was consolatory to think that this might be the mother's doing, and that Reine was being made a victim of, like himself. But (whether this also was her mother's doing he could not tell) to get an interview with Reine was beyond his power. He had no chance of saying a word to her till he had been at least ten days in Cannes, and the time of her departure with Madame de Mirfleur was drawing near. One evening, however, he happened to come into the room when Reine had stepped out upon the balcony, and followed her there hastily, determined to seize the occasion. It was a mild evening, not moonlight, as (he felt) it ought to have been, but full of the soft lightness of stars, and the luminous reflection of the sea. Beyond her, as she stood outside the window, he saw the sweep

of dim blue, with edges of white, the great Mediterranean, which forms the usual background on this coast. There was too little light for much colour, only a vague blueness or greyness, against which the slim, straight figure rose. He stepped out softly not to frighten her; but even then she started, and looked about for some means of escape, when she found herself captured and in his power. Everard did not take any sudden or violent advantage of his luck. He began quite gently, with an Englishman's precaution, to talk of the weather and the beautiful night.

"It only wants a moon to be perfect," he said. "Do you remember, Reine, the balcony at Kandersteg? I always associate you with balconies and moons. And do you remember, at Appenzell——"

It was on her lips to say, "Don't talk of Appenzell!" almost angrily, but she restrained herself. "I remember most things that have happened lately," she said; "I have done nothing to make me forget."

"Have I?" said Everard, glad of the chance; for to get an opening for reproach or self-defence was exactly what he desired.

"I did not say so. I suppose we both remember all that there is to remember," said Reine, and she

added hastily, "I don't mean anything more than I say."

"It almost sounds as if you did—and to see your letter," said Everard, "no one would have thought you remembered anything, or that we had ever known each other. Reine, Reine, why are you going away?"

"Why am I going away? I am not going what you call, away. I am going rather, as we should say, home —with mamma. Is it not the most natural thing to do?"

"Did you ever call Madame de Mirfleur's house home before?" said Everard; "do you mean it? Are not you coming to Whiteladies, to your own country, to the place you belong to? Reine, you frighten me. I don't understand what you mean."

"Do I belong to Whiteladies? Is England my country?" said Reine. "I am not so sure as you are. I am a Frenchwoman's daughter, and perhaps, most likely, it will turn out that mamma's house is the only one I have any right to."

Here she paused, faltering, to keep the tears out of her voice. Everard did not see that her lip was quivering, but he discovered it in the tremulous sound.

"What injustice you are doing to everybody!" he cried indignantly. "How can you treat us so?"

"Treat you? I was not thinking of you," said Reine. "Herbert will go to Whiteladies in May. It is home to him; but what is there that belongs to a girl? Supposing Herbert marries, would Whiteladies be my home? I have no right, no place anywhere. The only thing, I suppose, a girl has a right to is, perhaps, her mother. I have not even that—but mamma would give me a home. I should be sure of a home at least——"

"I do not understand you, Reine."

"It is tout simple, as mamma says; everything is tout simple," she said; "that Herbert should stand by himself, not wanting me; and that I should have nothing and nobody in the world. Tout simple! I am not complaining; I am only saying the truth. It is best that I should go to Normandy and try to please mamma. She does not belong to me, but I belong to her, in a way—and she would never be unkind to me. Well! there is nothing so very wonderful in what I say. Girls are like that; they have nothing belonging to them; they are not meant to have, mamma would say. It is tout simple; they are meant to ménager, and to cajole, and to submit; and I can do the last. That is

why I say that, most likely, Normandy will be my home after all."

"You cannot mean this," said Everard, troubled. "You never could be happy there; why should you change now? Herbert and you have been together all your lives; and if he marries——" Here Everard drew a long breath and made a pause. "You could not be happy with Monsieur, your step-father, and all the little Mirfleurs," he said.

"One can live, one can get on, without being happy," cried Reine. Then she laughed. "What is the use of talking? One has to do what one must. Let me go in, please. Balconies and moonlights are not good. To think too much, to talk folly, may be very well for you who can do what you please, but they are not good for girls. I am going in now."

"Wait one moment, Reine. Cannot you do what you please?—not only for yourself, but for others. Everything will be changed if you go; as for me, you don't care about me, what I feel—but Herbert. He has always been your charge; you have thought of him before everything——"

"And so I do now," cried the girl. Two big tears dropped out of her eyes. "So I do now! Bertie shall

not think me a burden, shall not complain of me if I should die. Let me pass, please. Everard, may I not even have so much of my own will as to go out or in if I like? I do not ask much more."

Everard stood aside, but he caught the edge of her loose sleeve as she passed him, and detained her still a moment. "What are you thinking of? what have you in your mind?" he said humbly. "Have you changed, or have I changed, or what has gone wrong? I don't understand you, Reine."

She stood for a moment hesitating, as if she might have changed her tone; but what was there to say? "I am not changed that I know of; I cannot tell whether you are changed or not," she said. "Nothing is wrong; it is tout simple, as mamma says."

What was *tout simple?* Everard had not a notion what was in her mind, or how it was that the delicate poise had been disturbed, and Reine taught to feel the disadvantage of her womanhood. She had not been in the habit of thinking or feeling anything of the kind. She had not been aware even for years and years, as her mother had said, whether she was girl or boy. The discovery had come all at once. Everard pondered dimly and with perplexity how much he had to do with

it, or what it was. But indeed he had nothing to do with it; the question between Reine and himself was a totally different question from the other which was for the moment supreme in her mind. Had she been free to think of it, I do not suppose Reine would have felt in much doubt as to her power over Everard. But it was the other phase of her life which was uppermost for the moment.

He followed her into the lighted room, where Madame de Mirfleur sat at her *tapisserie* in the light of the lamp. But when Reine went to the piano and began to sing "Ma Normandie" with her sweet young fresh voice, he retreated again to the balcony, irritated by the song more than by anything she had said. Madame de Mirfleur, who was a musician too, added a mellow second to the refrain of her child's song. The voices suited each other, and a prettier harmony could not have been, nor a more pleasant suggestion to any one whose mind was in tune. Indeed, it made the mother feel happy for the moment, though she was herself doubtful how far Reine's visit to the Norman château would be a success. "Je vais revoir ma Normandie," the girl sang, very sweetly; the mother joined in; mother and daughter were going together to that simple rural home, while the

young men went out into the world and enjoyed themselves. What more suitable, more pleasant for all parties? But Everard felt himself grow hot and angry. His temper flamed up with unreasonable, ferocious impatience. What a farce it was, he cried bitterly to himself. What did that woman want with Reine? she had another family whom she cared for much more. She would make the poor child wretched when she got her to that detestable Normandie they were singing about with so much false sentiment. Of course it was all some ridiculous nonsense of hers about propriety, something that never could have come into Reine's poor dear little innocent head if it had not been put there. When a young man is angry with the girl he is fond of, what a blessing it is when she has a mother upon whom he can put out his wrath! the reader knows how very little poor Madame de Mirfleur had to do with it. But though she was somewhat afraid of her daughter's visit, and anxious about its success, Reine's song was very pleasant to her, and she liked to put in that pretty second, and to feel that her child's sweet voice was in some sense an echo of her own.

"Thanks, chérie," she said when Reine closed the piano. "I love thy song, and I love thee for singing

it. Tiens, my voice goes with your fresh voice well enough still."

She was pleased, poor soul; but Everard, glaring at her from the balcony, would have liked to do something to Madame de Mirfleur had the rules of society permitted. He "felt like hurling things at her," like Maria in the play.

Yet—I do not know how it came to pass, but so it was—even then Everard did not carry out his intention of making a start on his own account, and going off and leaving the little party which was just about to break up, each going his or her own way. He lingered and lingered still till the moment came when the ladies had arranged to leave. Herbert by this time had made up his mind to go on to Italy too, and Everard, in spite of himself, found that he was tacitly pledged to be his young cousin's companion, though Bertie without Reine was not particularly to his mind. Though he had been partially weaned from his noisy young friends by Everard's presence, Herbert had still made his boyish desire to emancipate himself sufficiently apparent to annoy and bore the elder man, who having long known the delights of freedom, was not so eager to claim them, nor so jealous of their infringement. Everard

had no admiration of the billiard-rooms or smoking-rooms, or noisy boyish parties which Herbert preferred so much to the society of his mother and sister. "Please yourself," he said, shrugging his shoulders, as he left the lad at the door of these brilliant centres of society; and this shrug had more effect upon Herbert's mind than dozens of moral lectures. His first doubt, indeed, as to whether the "life" which he was seeing, was not really of the most advanced and brilliant kind, was suggested to him by that contemptuous movement of his cousin's shoulders. "He is a rustic, he is a Puritan," Herbert said to himself; but quite unconsciously Everard's shrug was as a cloud over his gaiety. Everard, however, shrugged his shoulders much more emphatically when he found that he was expected to act the part of guide, philosopher, and friend to the young fellow, who was no longer an invalid, and who was so anxious to see the world. Once upon a time he had been very ready to undertake the office, to give the sick lad his arm, to wheel him about in his chair, to carry him up or down stairs when that was needful.

"But you don't expect me to be Herbert's nurse all by myself," he said ruefully, just after Madame de Mirfleur had made a pretty little speech to him about

the benefit which his example and his society would be to her boy. Reine was in the room too, working demurely at her mother's *tapisserie*, and making no sign.

"He wants no nurse," said Madame de Mirfleur, "thank God; but your society, cher Monsieur Everard, will be everything for him. It will set our minds at ease. Reine, speak for thyself, then. Do not let Monsieur Everard go away without thy word too."

Reine raised her eyes from her work, and gave a quick, sudden glance at him. Then Everard saw that her eyes were full of tears. Were they for him? were they for Herbert? were they for herself? He could not tell. Her voice was husky and strained, very different from the clear carol with which this night even, over again, she had given forth the quavering notes of "Ma Normandie." How he hated the song which she had taken to singing over and over again when nobody wanted it! But her voice just then had lost all its music, and he was glad.

"Everard knows—what I would say," said Reine. "He always was—very good to Bertie;" and here her tears fell. They were so big that they made a storm of themselves, and echoed as they fell, these two tears.

"But speak, then," said her mother, "we go to-morrow; there is no more time to say anything after to-night."

Reine's eyes had filled again. She was exercising great control over herself, and would not weep nor break down, but she could not keep the tears out of her eyes. "He is not very strong," she said faltering. "He never was—without some one to take care of him—before. Oh! how can I speak? Perhaps I am forsaking him for my own poor pride, after all. If he got ill, what should I do? what should I do?"

"Chérie, if he gets ill, it will be the will of God; thou canst do no more. Tell what you wish to your cousin. Monsieur Everard is very good and kind; he will watch over him; he will take care of him——"

"I know, I know!" said Reine under her breath, making a desperate effort to swallow down the rising sob in her throat.

Through all this Everard sat very still, with a rueful sort of smile on his face. He did not like it, but what could he say? He had no desire to watch over Herbert, to take care of him, as Madame de Mirfleur said; but he was soft-hearted, and his very soul was melted by Reine's tears, though at the same time they wounded

him; for, alas! there was very little appearance of any thought for him, Everard, in all she looked and said.

And then there followed a silence in which, if he had been a brave man, he would have struck a stroke for liberty, and endeavoured to get out of this thankless office; and he fully meant to do it; but sat still looking at the lamp, and said nothing, though the opportunity was afforded him. A man who has so little courage or presence of mind surely deserves all his sufferings.

"Reine, there is still the packing to finish," said Madame de Mirfleur, with a look which her daughter understood. Reine got up and held out her hand mutely to Everard. She did not venture to look at him, but stood for a moment motionless by him, letting him hold her hand.

"It is not good-bye," he said, feeling very much like crying himself, "I shall see you to-morrow before you go away."

"We go away very early," said Madame de Mirfleur, rather alarmed to see her daughter standing there motionless, with her hand in her cousin's. "Reine!"

"I am coming," said Reine, and suddenly she gave Everard's hand a strenuous passionate grasp, and lifted her piteous liquid eyes to him. "If I am doing wrong,"

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she said, "oh, stand in my place, Everard, stand in my place! There is no one that can but you."

Did he unburden his soul then, and refuse the charge they were putting upon him? Nothing of the kind. "I will, Reine, I will!" he said, touched to the heart, and put her fingers to his lips.

This was how they parted. Next morning Reine went away with her mother, and Everard doing his best to be cheery, and Herbert sulking and dubious, saw them off. The young men looked at each other when they were left alone, not having realised it till that moment, I think.

"This is not what we expected," Everard said with a short laugh, and now that Herbert was left perfectly free to do as he liked, they went back to their rooms, and spent a most doleful afternoon and evening there, all alone. Then they set out on their southward way, travelling along the paths bordered by green aloes and gay orange trees, while poor Reine, wondering if she had done right or wrong, sped along the straight grey northern roads with her mother. Madame de Mirfleur was the only one of the party who carried any store of inward happiness; she was going back to her babies and her home.

CHAPTER V.

EVERARD and Herbert made their tour through Italy without very much heart for the performance; but partly out of pride, partly because, when once started on a *giro* of any kind, it is easier to go on than to turn back, they accomplished it. On Herbert's part, indeed, there was occasion for a very strong backbone of pride to keep him up, for the poor young fellow, whose health was not so strong as he thought, had one or two warnings of this fact, and when shut up for a week or two in Rome or in Naples, longed unspeakably for the sister who had always been his nurse and companion. Everard was very kind, and gave up a great deal of his time to the invalid; but it was not to be expected that he should absolutely devote himself, as Reine did, thinking of nothing in the world but Herbert. He had indeed many other things to think of, and when the state of convalescence was reached he left the patient to get better as he could, though he was very good to him when he was absolutely

ill. What more could any one ask? But poor Herbert wanted more. He wanted Reine, and thus learned how foolish it was to throw his prop away. Reine in the meanwhile wanted him, and spent many wretched hours in the heart of that still Normandy, longing to be with the travellers, to know what they were about, and how her brother arranged his life without her. The young men arrived at the Château Mirfleur at the earliest moment permissible, getting there in the end of April, to pick up Reine; and as they had all been longing for this meeting, any clouds that had risen on the firmament dispersed at once before the sunshine. They were so glad to be together again, that they did not ask why or how they had separated. And instead of singing "Ma Normandie," as she had done at Cannes, Reine sang "Home, sweet home," bringing tears into the eyes of the wanderers with that tender ditty. Herbert and she were indeed much excited about their home-going, as was natural. They had not been at Whiteladies for six years, a large slice out of their young lives. They had been boy and girl when they left it, and now they were man and woman. And all the responsibilities of life awaited Herbert, now three-and-twenty, in full possession of his rights. In the first tenderness of the reunion

Reine and he had again many talks over this life which was now beginning—a different kind of life from that which he thought, poor boy, he was making acquaintance with in billiard rooms, &c. I think he had ceased to confide in the billiard-room version of existence, but probably not so much from good sense or any virtue of his, as from the convincing effect of those two "attacks" which he had been assailed by at Rome and Naples, and which proved to him that he was not yet strong enough to dare vulgar excitements, and turn night into day.

As for Everard, it seemed to him that it was his fate to be left in the lurch. He had been told off to attend upon Herbert and take care of him when he had no such intention, and now, instead of rewarding him for his complaisance, Reine was intent upon cementing her own reconciliation with her brother, and making up for what she now represented to herself as her desertion of him. Poor Everard could not get a word or a look from her, but was left in a whimsical solitude to make acquaintance with Jeanot and Babette, and to be amiable to M. de Mirfleur, who was little beloved by his wife's elder children. Everard found him very agreeable, being driven to take refuge with the honest,

homely Frenchman, who had more charity for Herbert and Reine than they had for him. M. de Mirfleur, like his wife, found many things to be *tout simple* which distressed and worried the others. He was not even angry with the young people for their natural reluctance to acknowledge himself, which indeed showed very advanced perceptions in a step-father, and much forbearance. He set down all their *farouche* characteristics to their nationality. Indeed there was in the good man's mind an evident feeling that the fact of being English explained everything. Everard was left to the society of M. de Mirfleur and the children, who grew very fond of him; and indeed it was he who derived the most advantage from his week in Normandy, if he had only been able to see it in that light. And I am not sure that he did not think the renewed devotion of friendship between the brother and sister excessive; for it was not until they were ploughing the stormy seas on the voyage from Havre, which was their nearest seaport, to England, that he had so much as a chance of a conversation with Reine. Herbert, bound to be well on his triumphal return home, had been persuaded to go below and escape the night air. But Reine, who was in a restless condition, full of suppressed excitement, and a

tolerable sailor besides, could not keep still. She came up to the deck when the night was gathering, the dark waves running swiftly by the ship's side, the night-air blowing strong (for there was no wind, the sailors said) through the bare cordage, and carrying before it the huge black pennon of smoke from the funnel. The sea was not rough; but there was something congenial to the commotion and excitement of Reine's spirit in the throb and bound of the steamer, and in the dark waves, with their ceaseless movement, through which, stormy and black and full of mysterious life as they looked, the blacker solid hull pushed its resistless way. She liked the strong current of the air, and the sense of progress, and even the half-terror of that dark world in which this little floating world held its own between sky and sea. Everard tossed his cigar over the ship's side when he saw her, and came eagerly forward and drew her hand through his arm. It was the first time he had been able to say a word to her since they met. But even then Reine's first question was not encouraging.

"How do you think Bertie is looking?"

Every man, however, be his temper ever so touchy, can be patient when the inducement is strong enough.

Everard, though deeply tempted to make a churlish answer, controlled himself in a second, and replied—

"Very well, I think; not robust, perhaps, Reine; you must not expect him all at once to look robust."

"I suppose not," she said, with a sigh.

"But quite *well*, which is much more important. It is not the degree, but the kind, that is to be looked at," said Everard, with a great show of wisdom. "Strength is one thing, health is another; and it is not the most robustious men," he went on with a smile, "who live longest, Reine."

"I suppose not," she repeated. Then, after a pause, "Do you think, from what you have seen of him, that he will be content and satisfied with a country life? There is not much going on at Whiteladies; you said you found your life dull?"

"To excuse myself for coming when you called me, Reine."

"Ah! but I did not call you. I never should have ventured— Everard, you are doing me injustice. How could I have taken so much upon myself?"

"I wish you would take a great deal more upon yourself. You did, Reine. You said, 'Stand in my place.'"

"Yes, I know; my heart was breaking. Forgive me, Everard. Whom could I ask but you?"

"I will forgive you anything you like, if you say that. And I did take your place, Reine. I did not want to, mind you—I wanted to be with *you*, not Bertie—but I did."

"Everard, you are kind, and so cruel. Thanks! thanks a thousand times!"

"I do not want to be thanked," he said, standing over her; for she had drawn her hand from his arm, and was standing by the steep stairs which led below, ready for escape. "I don't care for thanks. I want to be rewarded. I am not one of the generous kind. I did not do it for nothing. Pay me, Reine!"

Reine looked him in the face very sedately. I do not think that his rudeness alarmed, or even annoyed her, to speak of. A gleam of malice came into her eyes; then a gleam of something else, which was, though it was hard to see it, a tear. Then she suddenly took his hand, kissed it before Everard had time to stop her, and fled below. And when she reached the safe refuge of the ladies' cabin, where no profane foot could follow her, Reine took off her hat, and shook down her hair, which was all blown about by the wind, and laughed

to herself. When she turned her eyes to the dismal little swinging lamp overhead, that dolorous light reflected itself in such glimmers of sunshine as it had never seen before. How gay the girl felt! and mischievous, like a kitten. Pay him! Reine sat down on the darksome hair-cloth sofa in the corner, with wicked smiles curling the corners of her mouth; and then she put her hands over her face, and cried. The other ladies, poor souls! were asleep or poorly, and paid no attention to all this pantomime. It was the happiest moment she had had for years, and this is how she ran away from it; but I don't think that the running away made her enjoy it the less.

As for Everard, he was left on deck feeling somewhat discomfited. It was the second time this had happened to him. She had kissed his hand before, and he had been angry and ashamed, as it was natural a man should be, of such an inappropriate homage. He had thought, to tell the truth, that his demand for payment was rather an original way of making a proposal; and he felt himself laughed at, which is, of all things in the world, the thing most trying to a lover's feelings. But after a while, when he had lighted and smoked a cigar, and fiercely perambulated the deck for ten

minutes, he calmed down, and began to enter into the spirit of the situation. Such a response, if it was intensely provoking, was not, after all, very discouraging. He went down-stairs after a while (having, as the reader will perceive, his attack of the love-sickness rather badly), and looked at Herbert, who was extended on another dismal sofa, similar to the one on which Reine indulged her malice, and spread a warm rug over him, and told him the hour, and that "we're getting on famously, old fellow!" with the utmost sweetness. But he could not himself rest in the dreary cabin, under the swinging lamp, and went back on deck, where there was something more congenial in the fresh air, the waves running high, the clouds breaking into dawn.

They arrived in the afternoon by a train which had been selected for them by instructions from Whiteladies; and no sooner had they reached the station than the evidences of a great reception made themselves apparent. The very station was decorated as if for royalty. Just outside was an arch made of green branches, and sweet with white boughs of the blossomed May. Quite a crowd of people were waiting to welcome the travellers —the tenants before mentioned, not a very large band, the village people in a mass, the clergy, and several of

the neighbours in their carriages, including the Farrel-Austins. Everybody who had any right to such a privilege pressed forward to shake hands with Herbert. "Welcome home!" they cried, cheering the young man, who was so much surprised and affected that he could scarcely speak to them. As for Reine, between weeping and smiling, she was incapable of anything, and had to be almost lifted into the carriage. Kate and Sophy Farrel-Austin waved their handkerchiefs and their parasols, and called out "Welcome Bertie!" over the heads of the other people. They were all invited to a great dinner at Whiteladies on the next day, at which half the county was to be assembled; and Herbert and Reine were especially touched by the kind looks of their cousins. "I used not to like them," Reine said, when the first moment of emotion was over, and they were driving along the sunny high-road towards Whiteladies; "it shows how foolish one's judgments are;" while Herbert declared "they were always jolly girls, and, by Jove! as pretty as any he had seen for ages." Everard did not say anything; but then they had taken no notice of him. He was on the back seat, not much noticed by any one; but Herbert and Reine were the observed of all observers. There were two or three

other arches along the rural road, and round each a little group of the country folks, pleased with the little show, and full of kindly welcomes. In front of the Almshouses all the old people were drawn up, and a large text, done in flowers, stretched along the front of the old red-brick building. "I cried unto the Lord, and He heard me," was the inscription; and trim old Dr. Richard, in his trim canonicals, stood at the gate in the centre of his flock when the carriage stopped. Herbert jumped down amongst them with his heart full, and spoke to the old people; while Reine sat in the carriage, and cried, and held out her hands to her friends. Miss Augustine had wished to be there too, among the others who, she thought, had brought Herbert back to life by their prayers; but her sister had interposed strenuously, and this had been given up. When the Almshouses were passed there was another arch, the finest of all. It was built up into high columns of green on each side, and across the arch was the inscription, "As welcome as the flowers in May," curiously worked in hawthorn blossoms, with dropping ornaments of the wild blue hyacinth from each initial letter. It was so pretty that they stopped the carriage to look at it, amid the cheers of some village people who clustered round,

for it was close to the village. Among them stood a tall, beautiful young woman, in a black dress, with a rosy, fair-haired boy, whose hat was decorated with the same wreath of May and hyacinth. Even in that moment of excitement, both brother and sister remarked her. "Who was that lady?—you bowed to her," said Reine, as soon as they had passed. "By Jove! how handsome she was!" said Herbert. Everard only smiled, and pointed out to them the servants about the gate of Whiteladies, and Miss Susan and Miss Augustine standing out in the sunshine in their grey gowns. The young people threw the carriage doors open at either side, and had alighted almost before it stopped. And then came that moment of inarticulate delight, when friends meet after a long parting, when questions are asked in a shower and no one answers, and the eyes that have not seen each other for so long look through and through the familiar faces, leaping to quick conclusions. Everard (whom no one took any notice of) kept still in the carriage, which had drawn up at the gate, and surveyed this scene from his elevation with a sense of disadvantage, yet superiority. He was out of all the excitement and commotion. Nobody could look at him, bronzed and strong, as if he had just come back from the edge of the grave;

but from his position of vantage he saw everything. He saw Miss Susan's anxious survey of Herbert, and the solemn, simple complaisance on poor Augustine's face, who felt it was her doing—hers and that of her old feeble chorus in the Almshouses; and he saw Reine pause, with her arms round Miss Susan's neck, to look her closely in the eyes, asking, "What is it? what is it?" not in words, but with an alarmed look. Everard knew, as if he had seen into her heart, that Reine had found out something strange in Miss Susan's eyes, and thinking of only one thing that could disturb her, leaped with a pang to the conclusion that Herbert was not looking so well or so strong as she had supposed. And I think that Everard, in the curious intuition of that moment when he was nothing but an onlooker, discovered also, that though Miss Susan looked so anxiously at Herbert, she scarcely saw him, and formed no opinion about his health, having something else much more keen and close in her mind.

"And here is Everard too," Miss Susan said; "he is not such a stranger as you others. Come, Everard, and help us to welcome them; and come in, Bertie, to your own house. Oh, how glad we all are to see you here!"

"Aunt Susan," said Reine, whispering in her ear, "I can see by your eyes that you think he is not strong still."

"By my eyes?" said Miss Susan, too much confused by many emotions to understand; but she made no disclaimer, only put her hand over her eyebrows, and led Herbert to the old porch, everybody following almost solemnly. Such a home-coming could scarcely fail to be somewhat solemn as well as glad. "My dear," she said, pausing on the threshold, "God bless you! God has brought you safe back when we never expected it. We should all say thank God, Bertie, when we bring you in at your own door."

And she stood with her hand on his shoulder, and stretched up to him (for he had grown tall in his illness), and kissed him, with one or two tears dropping on her cheeks. Herbert's eyes were wet too. He was very accessible to emotion; he turned round to the little group who were all so dear, and familiar, with his lip quivering. "I have most reason of all to say, 'Thank God,'" the young man said, with his heart full, standing there on his own threshold, which, a little while before, no one had hoped to see him cross again.

Just then the little gate which opened into Priory

Lane and was opposite the old porch, was pushed open, and two people came in. The jar of the gate as it opened caught everybody's ear; and Herbert in particular, being somewhat excited, turned hastily to see what the interruption was. It was the lady to whom Everard had bowed, who had been standing under the triumphal arch as they passed. She approached them, crossing the lawn with a familiar, assured step, leading her child. Miss Susan, who had been standing close by him, her hand still fondly resting on Herbert's shoulder, started at sight of the new-comer, and withdrew quickly, impatiently from his side; but the young man, naturally enough, had no eyes for what his old aunt was doing, but stood quite still, unconscious, in his surprise, that he was staring at the beautiful stranger. Reine, standing just behind him, stared too, equally surprised, but searching in her more active brain what it meant. Giovanna came straight up to the group in the porch. "Madame Suzanne?" she said, with a self-possession which seemed to have deserted the others. Miss Susan obeyed the summons with tremulous haste. She came forward growing visibly pale in her excitement. "Herbert," she said, "and Reine," making a pause after the words, "this is a—lady who is staying here. This is

Madame Jean Austin from Bruges, of whom you have heard——"

"And her child," said Giovanna, putting him forward.

"Madame Jean? who is Madame Jean?" said Herbert, whispering to his aunt, after he had bowed to the stranger. Giovanna was anxious about this meeting, and her ears were very sharp, and she heard the question. Her great black eyes shone, and she smiled upon the young man, who was more deeply impressed by her sudden appearance than words could say.

"Monsieur," she said with a curtsey, smiling, "it is the little child who is the person to look at, not me. Me, I am simple Giovanna, the widow of Jean; nobody; but the little boy is most to you: he is the heir."

"The heir?" said Herbert, turning a little pale. He looked round upon the others with bewilderment, asking explanations; then suddenly recollecting, said, "Ah, I understand; the next of kin that was lost. I had forgotten. Then, Aunt Susan, this is *my* heir?"

"Yes," she said, with blanched lips. She could not have uttered another word, had it been to deliver herself and the race from this burden for ever.

Giovanna had taken the child into her arms. At

this moment she swung him down lightly as a feather on to the raised floor of the porch, where they were all standing. "Jean!" she cried, "ton devoir!" The baby turned his blue eyes upon her, half-frightened; then looked round the strange faces about him, struggling with an inclination to cry; then, mustering his faculties, took his little cap off with the gravity of a judge, and flinging it feebly in the air, shouted out, "Vive M. 'Erbert!" "Encore," cried Giovanna. "Vive Monsieur 'Erbert!" said the little fellow loudly, with a wave of his small hand.

This little performance had a very curious effect upon the assembled party. Surprise and pleasure shone in Herbert's eyes; he was quite captivated by this last scene of his reception; and even Everard, though he knew better, was charmed by the beautiful face and beautiful attitude of the young woman who stood animated and blooming, like the leader of an orchestra, on the lawn outside. But Reine's suspicions darted up like an army in ambush all in a moment, though she could not tell what she was suspicious of. As for Miss Susan, she stood with her arms dropped by her side, her face fallen blank. All expression seemed to have gone out of it, everything but a kind of weary pain.

"Who is she, Reine? Everard, who is she?" Herbert whispered anxiously, when, some time later, the three went off together to visit their childish haunts; the old play-room, the musicians' gallery, the ancient corridors in which they had once frolicked. Miss Susan had come up-stairs with them, but had left them for the moment. "Tell me, quick, before Aunt Susan comes back."

"Ah!" cried Reine, with a laugh, though I don't think she was really merry, "this is the old time back again, indeed, when we must whisper and have secrets as soon as Aunt Susan is away."

"But who is she?" said Herbert. They had come into the gallery overlooking the hall, where the table was already spread for dinner. Giovanna was walking round it, with her child perched on her shoulder. At the sound of the steps and voices above she turned round, and waved her hand to them. "Vive Monsieur 'Erbert!" she sang, in a melodious voice which filled all the echoes. She was so strong that it was nothing to her to hold the baby poised on her shoulder, while she pointed up to the figures in the gallery and waved her hand to them. The child, bolder this time, took up his little shout with a crow of pleasure. The three ghosts in the gallery stood and looked down upon this

pretty group with very mingled feelings. But Herbert, for his part, being very sensitive to all homage, felt a glow of pleasure steal over him. "When a man has a welcome like this," he said to himself, "it is very pleasant to come home!"

CHAPTER VI.

"ME! I am nobody," said Giovanna. "Ces dames have been very kind to me. I was the son's widow, the left-out one at home. Does mademoiselle understand? But then you can never have been the left-out one—the one who was always wrong."

"No," said Reine. She was not, however, so much touched by this confidence as Herbert, who, though he was not addressed, was within hearing, and gave very distracted answers to Miss Susan, who was talking to him, by reason of listening to what Giovanna said.

"But I knew that the petit was not nobody, like me; and I brought him here. He is the next, till M. Herbert will marry, and have his own heirs. That is what I desire, mademoiselle, believe me—for now I love Vite-ladies, not for profit, but for love. It was for money I came at first," she said with a laugh, "to live; but now I have de l'amitié for every one, even this old Stefen, who do not love me nor my child."

She said this laughing, while Stevens stood before her with the tray in his hands, serving her with tea; and I leave the reader to divine the feelings of that functionary, who had to receive this direct shaft levelled at him, and make no reply. Herbert, whose attention by this time had been quite drawn away from Miss Susan, laughed too. He turned his chair round to take part in this talk, which was much more interesting than anything his aunt had to say.

"That was scarcely fair," he said, "the man hearing you; for he dared not say anything in return, you know."

"Oh, he do dare say many things!" said Giovanna. "I like to have my little revenge, me. The domestics did not like me at first, M. Herbert; I know not why. It is the nature of you other English not to love the foreigner. You are proud. You think yourselves more good than we."

"Not so, indeed!" cried Herbert eagerly; "just the reverse, I think. Beside, we are half foreign ourselves, Reine and I."

"Whatever you may be, Herbert, I count myself pure English," said Reine with dignity. She was suspicious and disturbed, though she could not tell why.

"Mademoiselle has reason," said Giovanna. "It is very fine to be English. One can feel so that one is more good than all the world! As soon as I can speak well enough, I shall say so too. I am of no nation at present, me—Italian born, Belge by living—and the Belges are not a people. They are a little French, a little Flemish, not one thing or another. I prefer to be English too. I am Austin, like all you others, and Viteladies is my 'ome."

This little speech made the others look at each other, and Herbert laughed with a curious consciousness. Whiteladies was his. He had scarcely ever realised it before. He did not even feel quite sure now that he was not here on a visit, his Aunt Susan's guest. Was it the others who were his guests, all of them, from Miss Susan herself, who had always been the 'Squire, down to this piquant stranger? Herbert laughed with a sense of pleasure and strangeness, and shy boyish wonder whether he should say something about being glad to see her there, or be silent. Happily he decided that silence was the right thing, and nobody spoke for the moment. Giovanna, however, who seemed to have taken upon her to amuse the company, soon resumed,—

"In England it is not amusing, the winter, M.

Herbert. Ah, mon Dieu! what a consolation to make the garlands to build up the arch! Figure to yourself that I was up at four o'clock this morning, and all the rooms full of those pretty aubépines, which you call may. My fingers smell of them now; and look, how they are pricked!" she said, holding them out. She had a pretty hand, large like her person, but white and shapely, and strong. There was a force about it, and about the solid round white arm with which she had tossed about the heavy child, which had impressed Herbert greatly at the time; and its beauty struck him all the more now, from the sense of strength connected with it—strength and vitality, which in his weakness seemed to him the grandest things in the world.

"Did you prick your fingers for me?" he said, quite touched by this devotion to his service; and but for his shyness, and the presence of so many people, I think he would have ventured to kiss the wounded hand. But as it was, he only looked at it, which Reine did also with a half-disdainful civility, while Everard peeped over her shoulder, half laughing. Miss Susan had pushed her chair away.

"Not for you altogether," said Giovanna frankly, "for I did not know you, M. Herbert; but for pleasure, and

to amuse myself; and perhaps a little that you and mademoiselle might have de l'amitié for me when you knew. What is de l'amitié in English? Friendship—ah, that is grand, serious, not what I mean. And we must not say love—that is too much, that is autre chose."

Herbert, charmed, looking at the beautiful speaker, thought she blushed; and this moved him mightily, for Giovanna was not like a little girl at a dance, an *ingénue*, who blushed for nothing. She was a woman, older than himself, and not pretty, but grand and great and beautiful; nor ignorant, but a woman who knew more of that wonderful "life" which dazzled the boy—a great deal more than he himself did, or any one here. That she should blush while she spoke to him was in some way an intoxicating compliment to Herbert's own influence and manly power.

"You mean *like*," said Reine, who persistently acted the part of a wet blanket. "That is what we say in English, when it means something not so serious as friendship and not so close as love—a feeling on the surface; when you would say 'il me plaît' in French, in English you say 'I like him.' It means just that, and no more."

Giovanna shrugged her shoulders with a little shiver.

"Comme c'est froid, ça!" she said, snatching up Miss Susan's shawl, which lay on a chair, and winding it round her. Miss Susan half turned round, with a consciousness that something of hers was being touched, but she said nothing, and her eye was dull and veiled. Reine, who knew that her aunt did not like her properties interfered with, was more surprised than ever, and half alarmed, though she did not know why.

"Ah, yes, it is cold, very cold, you English," said Giovanna, unwinding the shawl again, and stretching it out behind her at the full extent of her white arms. How the red drapery threw out her fine head, with the close braids of black hair, wavy and abundant, twined round and round it, in defiance of fashion! Her hair was not at all the hair of the period, either in colour or texture. It was black, and glossy, and shining, as dark hair ought to be; and she was pale, with scarcely any colour about her except her lips. "Ah, how it is cold! Mademoiselle Reine, I will not say *like*—I will say de l'amitié! It is more sweet. And then, if it should come to be love after, it will be more natural," she said with a smile.

I do not know if it was her beauty, to which women are, I think, almost more susceptible than men, vulgar

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prejudice notwithstanding—or perhaps it was something ingratiating and sweet in her smile; but Reine's suspicions and her coldness quite unreasonably gave way, as they had quite unreasonably sprung up, and she drew nearer to the stranger and opened her heart unawares, while the young men struck in, and the conversation became general. Four young people chattering all together, talking a great deal of nonsense, running into wise speculations, into discussions about the meaning of words, like and love, and *de l'amitié!*—one knows what a pleasant jumble it is, and how the talkers enjoy it; all the more as they are continually skimming the surface of subjects which make the nerves tingle and the heart beat. The old room grew gay with the sound of their voices, soft laughter, and exclamations which gave variety to the talk. Curious! Miss Susan drew her chair a little more apart. It was she who was the one left out. In her own house, which was not her own house any longer—in the centre of the kingdom where she had been mistress so long, but was no more mistress! She said to herself, with a little natural bitterness, that perhaps it was judicious and really kind, after all, on the part of Herbert and Reine, to do it at once, to leave no doubt on the subject, to supplant her then and there,

keeping up no fiction of being her guests still, or considering her the head of the house. Much better, and on the whole more kind! for of course anything else would be a fiction. Her reign had been long, but it was over. The change must be made some time, and when so well, so appropriately as now? After a while she went softly round behind the group, and secured her shawl. She did not like her personal properties interfered with. No one had ever done it except this daring creature, and it was a thing Miss Susan was not prepared to put up with. She could bear the great downfall which was inevitable, but these small annoyances she could not bear. She secured her shawl, and brought it with her, hanging it over the back of her chair. But when she got up and when she reseated herself, no one took any notice. She was already supplanted and set aside the very first night! It was sudden, she said to herself with a catching of her breath, but on the whole it was best.

I need not say that Reine and Herbert were totally innocent of any such intention, and that it was the inadvertence of their youth that was to blame, and nothing else. By-and-by the door opened softly, and Miss Augustine came in. She had been attending a

special evening service at the Almshouses—a thanksgiving for Herbert's return. She had, a curious decoration for her, a bit of flowering may in the waistband of her dress, and she brought in the sweet freshness of the night with her, and the scent of the hawthorn, special and modest gem of the May from which it takes its name. She broke up without any hesitation the lively group, which Miss Susan, sore and sad, had withdrawn from. Augustine was a woman of one idea, and had no room in her mind for anything else. Like Monsieur and Madame de Mirfleur, though in a very different way, many things were *tout simple* to her, against which less single-minded persons broke their heads, if not their hearts.

"You should have come with me, Herbert," she said, half disapproving. "You may be tired, but there could be nothing more refreshing than to give thanks. Though perhaps," she added, folding her hands, "it was better that the thanksgiving should be like the prayers, disinterested, no personal feeling mixing in. Yes, perhaps that was best. Giovanna, you should have been there."

"Ah, pardon!" said Giovanna with a slight imperceptible yawn, "it was to welcome mademoiselle and monsieur that I stayed. Ah! the musique! Tenez!

ma sœur, I will make the music with a very good heart, now."

"That is a different thing," said Miss Augustine. "They trusted to you—though to me the hymns they sing themselves are more sweet than yours. One voice may be pleasant to hear, but it is but one. When all sing, it is like heaven, where that will be our occupation night and day."

"Ah, ma sœur," said Giovanna, "but there they will sing in tune, n'est-ce pas, all the old ones? Tenez! I will make the music now."

And with this she went straight to the piano, uninvited, unbidden, and began a *Te Deum* out of one of Mozart's masses, the glorious rolling strains of which filled not only the room, but the house. Giovanna scarcely knew how to play; her science was all of the ear. She gave the sentiment of the music, rather than its notes—a reminiscence of what she had heard—and then she sang that most magnificent of hymns, pouring it forth, I suppose, from some undeveloped instinct of art in her, with a fervency and power which the bystanders were fain to think only the highest feeling could inspire. She was not bad, though she did many wrong things with the greatest equanimity; yet we know that

she was not good either, and could not by any chance have really had the feeling which seemed to swell and tremble in her song. I don't pretend to say how this was; but it is certain that stupid people, carnal and fleshly persons, sing thus often as if their whole heart, and that the heart of a seraph, was in the strain. Giovanna sang so that she brought the tears to their eyes. Reine stole away out from among the others, and put herself humbly behind the singer, and joined her soft voice, broken with tears, to hers. Together they appealed to prophets, and martyrs, and apostles, to praise the God who had wrought this deliverance, like so many others. Herbert, for whom it all was, hid his face in his clasped hands, and felt that thrill of awed humility, yet of melting, tender pride, with which the simple soul recognises itself as the hero, the object of such an offering. He could not face the light, with his eyes and his heart so full. Who was he, that so much had been done for him? And yet, poor boy, there was a soft pleased consciousness in his heart that there must be something in him, more than most, to warrant that which had been done. Augustine stood upright by the mantelpiece, with her arms folded in her sleeves, and her poor visionary soul still as usual. To her this was something like a

legal acknowledgment—a receipt, so to speak, for value received. It was due to God, who, for certain inducements of prayer, had consented to do what was asked of Him. She had already thanked Him, and with all her heart; and she was glad that every one should thank Him, that there should be no stint of praise. Miss Susan was the only one who sat unmoved, and even went on with her knitting. To some people of absolute minds one little rift within the lute makes mute all the music. For my part, I think Giovanna, though her code of truth and honour was very loose, or indeed one might say non-existent—and though she had schemes in her mind which no very high-souled person could have entertained—was quite capable of being sincere in her thanksgiving, and not at all incapable of some kinds of religious feeling; and though she could commit a marked and unmistakable act of dishonesty without feeling any particular trouble in her conscience, was yet an honest soul in her way. This is one of the paradoxes of humanity, which I don't pretend to understand and cannot explain, yet believe in. But Miss Susan did not believe in it. She thought it desecration to hear those sacred words coming forth from this woman's mouth. In her heart she longed to get up in righteous wrath, and

turn the deceiver out of the house. But, alas! what could she do? She too was a deceiver, more than Giovanna, and dared not interfere with Giovanna, lest she should be herself betrayed; and last of all, and for the moment almost bitterest of all, it was no longer her house, and she had no right to turn any one out, or take any one in, any more for ever!

"Who is she? Where did they pick her up? How do they manage to keep her here, a creature like that?" said Herbert to Everard, as they lounged together for half an hour in the old playroom, which had been made into a smoking-room for the young men. Herbert was of opinion that to smoke a cigar before going to bed was a thing that every man was called upon to do. Those who did not follow this custom were boys or invalids; and though he was not fond of it, he went through the ceremony nightly. He could talk of nothing but Giovanna, and it was with difficulty that Everard prevailed upon him to go to his room after all the emotions of the day.

"I want to know how they have got her to stay," he said, trying to detain his cousin that he might go on talking on this attractive subject.

"You should ask Aunt Susan," said Everard, shrugging

his shoulders. He himself was not impressed in this sort of way by Giovanna. He thought her very handsome, and very clever, giving her credit for a greater amount of wisdom than she really possessed, and setting down all she had done and all she had said to an elaborate scheme, which was scarcely true; for the dangerous point in Giovanna's wiles was that they were half nature, something spontaneous and unconscious being mixed up in every one of them. Everard resolved to warn Miss Susan, and put her on her guard, and he groaned to himself over the office of guardian and protector to this boy which had been thrust upon him. The wisest man in the world could not keep a boy of three-and-twenty out of mischief. He had done his best for him, but it was not possible to do any more.

While he was thinking thus, and Herbert was walking about his room in a pleasant ferment of excitement and pleasure, thinking over all that had happened, and the flattering attention that had been shown to him on all sides, two other scenes were going on in different rooms, which bore testimony to a kindred excitement. In the first the chief actor was Giovanna, who had gone to her chamber in a state of high delight, feeling the ball at her feet, and everything in her power. She did not object

to Herbert himself; he was young and handsome, and would never have the power to coerce and control her; and she had no intention of being anything but good to him. She woke the child, to whom she had carried some sweetmeats from the dessert, and played with and petted him—a most immoral proceeding, as any mother will allow: for by the time she was sleepy, and ready to go to bed, little Jean was broad awake, and had to be frightened and threatened with black closets and black men before he could be hushed into quiet; and the untimely bon-bons made him ill. Giovanna had not thought of all that. She wanted some one to help her to get rid of her excitement, and disturbed the baby's childish sleep, and deranged his stomach, without meaning him any harm. I am afraid, however, it made little difference to Jean that she was quite innocent of any evil intention, and indeed believed herself to be acting the part of a most kind and indulgent mother.

But while Giovanna was playing with the child, Reine stole into Miss Susan's room to disburden her soul, and seek that private delight of talking a thing over which women love. She stole in with the lightest tap, scarcely audible, noiseless, in her white dressing-gown, and light foot; and in point of fact Miss Susan did not hear that

soft appeal for admission. Therefore she was taken by surprise when Reine appeared. She was seated in a curious blank and stupor, "anywhere," not on her habitual chair by the side of the bed, where her table stood with her books on it, and where her lamp was burning, but near the door, on the first chair she had come to, with that helpless, forlorn air which extreme feebleness or extreme pre-occupation gives. She roused herself with a look of almost terror when she saw Reine, and started from her seat.

"How you frightened me!" she said fretfully. "I thought you had been in bed. After your journey and your fatigue, you ought to be in bed."

"I wanted to talk to you," said Reine. "Oh, Aunt Susan, it is so long—so long since we were here; and I wanted to ask you, do you think he looks well? Do you think he looks strong? You have something strange in your eyes, Aunt Susan. Oh, tell me if you are disappointed—if he does not look so well as you thought."

Miss Susan made a pause; and then she answered as if with difficulty, "Your brother? Oh yes, I think he is looking very well—better even than I thought."

Reine came closer to her, and putting one soft arm

into hers, looked at her, examining her face with wistful eyes,—"Then what is it, Aunt Susan?" she said.

"What is—what? I do not understand you," cried Miss Susan, shifting her arm, and turning away her face. "You are tired, and you are fantastic, as you always were. Reine, go to bed."

"Dear Aunt Susan," cried Reine, "don't put me away. You are not vexed with us for coming back?—you are not sorry we have come? Oh, don't turn your face from me! You never used to turn from me, except when I had done wrong. Have we done wrong, Herbert or me?"

"No, child, no—no, I tell you! Oh, Reine, don't worry me now. I have enough without that—I cannot bear any more."

Miss Susan shook off the clinging hold. She roused herself, and walked across the room, and put off her shawl, which she had drawn round her shoulders to come up-stairs. She had not begun to undress, though Martha by this time was fast asleep. In the trouble of her mind she had sent Martha also away. She took off her few ornaments with trembling hands, and put them down on the table.

"Go to bed, Reine; I am tired too—forgive me,

dear," she said with a sigh, "I cannot talk to you to-night."

"What is it, Aunt Susan?" said Reine softly, looking at her with anxious eyes.

"It is nothing—nothing! only I cannot talk to you. I am not angry; but leave me, dear child, leave me for to-night."

"Aunt Susan," said the girl, going up to her again, and once more putting an arm round her, "it is something about—*that* woman. If it is not us, it is her. Why does she trouble you?—why is she here? Don't send me away, but tell me about her. Dear Aunt Susan, you are ill, you are looking so strange, not like yourself. Tell me—I belong to you. I can understand you better than any one else."

"Oh, hush, hush, Reine; you don't know what you are saying. It is nothing, child, nothing! *You* understand me!"

"Better than any one," cried the girl, "for I belong to you. I can read what is in your face. None of the others know, but I saw it. Aunt Susan, tell me—whisper—I will keep it sacred, whatever it is, and it will do you good."

Miss Susan leant her head upon the fragile young

creature who clung to her. Reine, so slight and young, supported the stronger, older woman, with a force which was all of the heart and soul; but no words came from the sufferer's lips. She stood clasping the girl close to her, and for a moment gave way to a great sob, which shook her like a convulsion. The touch, the presence, the innocent bosom laid against her own in all that ignorant instinctive sympathy which is the great mystery of kindred, did her good. Then she kissed the girl tenderly, and sent her away.

"God bless you, darling! though I am not worthy to say it—not worthy!" said the woman, trembling, who had always seemed to Reine the very emblem of strength, authority, and steadfast power.

She stole away, quite hushed and silenced, to her room. What could this be? Not worthy! Was it some religious panic that had seized upon Miss Susan —some horror of doubt and darkness, like that which Reine herself had passed through? This was the only thing the girl could think of. Pity kept her from sleeping, and breathed a hundred prayers through her mind, as she lay and listened to the old clock, telling the hours with its familiar voice. Very familiar, and yet novel and strange—more strange than if she had never heard

it before—though so many nights, year after year, it had chimed through her dreams, and woke her to many another soft May morning, more tranquil and more sweet even than this.

CHAPTER VII.

NEXT day was the day of the great dinner to which Miss Susan had invited half the county, to welcome the young master of the house, and mark the moment of her own withdrawal from her long supremacy in Whiteladies. Though she had felt with some bitterness on the previous night the supposed intention of Herbert and Reine to supplant her at once, Miss Susan was far too sensible a woman to make voluntary vexation for herself, out of an event so well known and long anticipated. That she must feel it was of course inevitable, but as she felt no real wrong in it, and had for a long time expected it, there was not, apart from the painful burden on her mind which threw a dark shadow over everything, any bitterness in the necessary and natural event. She had made all her arrangements without undue fuss or publicity, and had prepared for herself, as I have said, a house, which had providentially fallen vacant, on the other side of the village, where

Augustine would still be within reach of the Almshouses. I am not sure that, so far as she was herself concerned, the sovereign of Whiteladies, now on the point of abdication, would not have preferred to be a little farther off, out of daily sight of her forsaken throne; but this would have deprived Augustine of all that made life to her, and Miss Susan was too strong, too proud, and too heroic, to hesitate for a moment, or to think her own sentiment worth indulging. Perhaps, indeed, even without that powerful argument of Augustine, she would have scorned to indulge a feeling which she could not have failed to recognise as a mean and petty one. She had her faults, like most people, and she had committed a great wrong, which clouded her life, but there was nothing petty or mean about Miss Susan. After Reine had left her on the previous night, she made a great effort, and recovered her self-command. I don't know why she had allowed herself to be so beaten down. One kind of excitement, no doubt, predisposes towards another; and after the triumph and joy of Herbert's return, her sense of the horrible cloud which hung over her personally, the revelation which Giovanna at any moment had it in her power to make, the evident intention she had of ingratiating herself with the new-comers,

and the success so far of the attempt, produced a reaction which almost drove Miss Susan wild. If you will think of it, she had cause enough. She, heretofore an honourable and spotless woman, who had never feared the face of man, to lie now under the horrible risk of being found out—to be at the mercy of a passionate, impulsive creature, who could at any moment cover her with shame, and pull her down from her pedestal. I think that at such moments to have the worst happen, to be pulled down finally, to have her shame published to the world, would have been the best thing that could have happened to Miss Susan. She would then have raised up her humbled head again, and accepted her punishment, and faced the daylight, free from fear of anything that could befall her. The worst of it all now was this intolerable sense that there was something to be found out, that everything was not honest and open in her life, as it had always been. And by times this consciousness overpowered and broke her down, as it had done on the previous night. But when a vigorous soul is thus overpowered and breaks down, the moment of its utter overthrow marks a new beginning of power and endurance. The old fable of Antæus, who derived fresh strength whenever he was thrown, from contact

with his mother earth, is profoundly true. Miss Susan had been thrown too, had fallen, and had rebounded with fresh force. Even Reine could scarcely see in her countenance next morning any trace of the emotion of last night. She took her place at the breakfast table with a smile, with composure which was not feigned, putting bravely her burden behind her, and resolute to make steady head as long as she could against any storm that could threaten. Even when Herbert eluded that "business consultation," and begged to be left free to roam about the old house, and renew his acquaintance with every familiar corner, she was able to accept the postponement without pain. She watched the young people go out even with almost pleasure—the brother and sister together, and Everard—and Giovanna at the head of the troop, with little Jean perched on her shoulder. Giovanna was fond of wandering about without any covering on her head, having a complexion which I suppose would not spoil, and loving the sun. And it suited her somehow to have the child on her shoulder, to toss him about, to the terror of all the household, in her strong beautiful arms. I rather think it was because the household generally was frightened by this rough play, that Giovanna had taken to it; for

she liked to shock them, not from malice, but from a sort of schoolboy mischief. Little Jean, who had got over all his dislike to her, enjoyed his perch upon her shoulder; and it is impossible to tell how Herbert admired her, her strength, her quick swift easy movements, the lightness and grace with which she carried the boy, and all her gambols with him, in which a certain risk always mingled. He could not keep his eyes from her, and followed wherever she led, penetrating into rooms where, in his delicate boyhood, he had never been allowed to go.

"I know myself in every part," cried Giovanna gaily. "I have all visited, all seen, even where it is not safe. It is safe here, M. Herbert. Come then and look at the carvings, all close; they are beautiful when you are near."

They followed her about within and without, as if she had been the cicerone, though they had all known Whiteladies long before she had; and even Reine's nascent suspicions were not able to stand before her frank energy and cordial ignorant talk. For she was quite ignorant, and made no attempt to conceal it.

"Me, I love not at all what is so old," she said with a laugh. "I prefer the smooth wall and the big window,

and a floor well frotté, that shines. Wood that is all cut like the lace, what good does that do? and brick, that is nothing, that is common. I love stone châteaux, with much of window, and little tourelles at the top. But if you love the wood, and the brick, très bien! I know myself in all the little corners," said Giovanna. And outside and in, it was she who led the way.

Once again—and it was a thing which had repeatedly happened before this, notwithstanding the terror and oppression of her presence—Miss Susan was even grateful to Giovanna, who left her free to make all her arrangements, and amused and interested the newcomers, who were strangers in a sense, though to them belonged the house and everything in it; and I doubt if it had yet entered into her head that Giovanna's society or her beauty involved any danger to Herbert. She was older than Herbert; she was "not a lady;" she was an intruder and alien, and nothing to the young people, though she might amuse them for the moment. The only danger Miss Susan saw in her was one tragic and terrible danger to herself, which she had determined for the moment not to think of. For everybody else she was harmless. So at least Miss Susan, with an inadvertence natural to her pre-occupied mind, thought.

And there were a great many arrangements to make for the great dinner, and many things besides that required looking after. However distinctly one has foreseen the necessities of a great crisis, yet it is only when it arrives that they acquire their due urgency. Miss Susan now, for almost the first time, felt the house she had secured at the other end of the village to be a reality. She felt at last that her preparations were real, that the existence in which for the last six months there had been much that was like a painful dream, had come out suddenly into the actual and certain, and that she had now a change to undergo not much unlike the change of death. Things that had been planned only, had to be done now—a difference which is wonderful—and the stir and commotion which had come into the house with the arrival of Herbert was the preface of a commotion still more serious. And as Miss Susan went about giving her orders, she tried to comfort herself with the thought that now at last Giovanna must go. There was no longer any pretence for her stay. Herbert had come home. She had and could have no claim upon Susan and Augustine Austin at the Grange, whatever claim she might have on the inmates of Whiteladies; nor could she transfer herself to the young people, and

live with Herbert and Reine. Even she, though she was not reasonable, must see that now there was no further excuse for her presence—that she must go. Miss Susan settled in her mind the allowance she would offer her. It would be a kind of black mail, blood money, the price of her secret; but better that than exposure. And then, Giovanna had not been disagreeable of late. Rather the reverse; she had tried, as she said, to show *de l'amitié*. She had been friendly, cheerful, rather pleasant, in her strange way. Miss Susan, with a curious feeling for which she could not quite account, concluded with herself that she would not wish this creature, who had for so long belonged to her, as it were—who had been one of her family, though she was at the same time her enemy, her greatest trouble—to fall back unaided upon the shop at Bruges, where the people had not been kind to her. No; she would, she said to herself, be very thankful to get rid of Giovanna, but not to see her fall into misery and helplessness. She should have an income enough to keep her comfortable. This was a luxury which Miss Susan felt she could venture to give herself. She would provide for her persecutor, and get rid of her, and be free of the panic which now was before her night and day. This thought cheered

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her as she went about the house, superintending the hanging of the tapestry in the hall, which was only put there on grand occasions, and the building up of the old silver on the great oak buffet. Everything that Whiteladies could do in the way of splendour was to be exhibited to-night. There had been no feast when Herbert came of age, for indeed it had been like enough that his birthday might be his death day also. But now all these clouds had rolled away, and his future was clear. She paid a solemn visit to the cellar with Stevens to get out the best wines, her father's old claret and madeira, of which she had been so careful, saving it for Herbert; or if not for Herbert, for Everard, whom she had looked upon as her personal heir. Not a bottle of it should ever have gone to Farrel-Austin, the reader may be sure, though she was willing to feast him to-night, and give him of her best, to celebrate her triumph over him—a triumph which, thank Heaven! was all innocent, not brought about by plotting or planning—God's doing, and not hers.

I will not attempt to describe all the company, the best people in that corner of Berkshire, who came from all points, through the roads which were white and sweet with May, to do honour to Herbert's home-

coming. It is too late in this history, and there is too much of more importance to tell you, to leave me room for those excellent people. Lord Kingsborough was there, and proposed Herbert's health; and Sir Reginald Parke, and Sir Francis Rivers, and the Hon. Mr. Skindle, who married Lord Maidenhead's daughter, Lady Cordelia; and all the first company in the county, down to (or up to) the great China merchant who had bought St. Dunstan's, once the property of a Howard. It is rare to see a dinner party so large or so important, and still more rare to see such a room so filled. The old musicians' gallery was put to its proper use for the first time for years; and now and then, not too often, a soft fluting and piping and fiddling came from the partial gloom, floating over the heads of the well-dressed crowd who sat at the long, splendid table, in a blaze of light and reflection, and silver, and crystal, and flowers.

"I wish we could be in the gallery to see ourselves sitting here, in this great show," Everard whispered to Reine as he passed her to his inferior place; for it was not permitted to Everard on this great occasion to hand in the young mistress of the house, in whose favour Miss Susan intended after this night to abdicate. Reine

looked up with soft eyes to the dim corner in which the three used to scramble and rustle, and catch the oranges, and, I fear, thought more of this reminiscence than of what her companion said to her, who was ignorant of the old times. But indeed the show was worth seeing from the gallery, where old Martha, and young Jane, and the good French Julie, who had come with Reine, clustered in the children's very corner, keeping out of sight behind the tapestry, and pointing out to each other the ladies and their fine dresses. The maids cared nothing about the gentlemen, but shook their heads over Sophy and Kate's bare shoulders, and made notes of how the dresses were made. Julie communicated her views on the subject with an authority which her auditors received without question, for was not she French? —a large word, which takes in the wilds of Normandy as well as Paris, that centre of the civilised world. Herbert sat with his back to these eager watchers, at the foot of the table, taking his natural place for the first time, and half hidden by the voluminous robes of Lady Kingsborough and Lady Rivers. The pink *gros grain* of one of those ladies and the gorgeous white *moire* of the other dazzled the women in the gallery; but, apart from such professional considerations, the scene was a

charming one to look at, with the twinkle of the many lights, the brightness of the flowers and the dresses—the illuminated spot in the midst of the partial darkness of the old walls, all gorgeous with colour, and movement, and the hum of sound. Miss Susan at the head of the table, in her old point lace, looked like a queen, Martha thought. It was her apotheosis, her climax, her concluding triumph—a sort of phœnix blaze with which she meant to end her life.

The dinner was a gorgeous dinner, worthy the hall and the company; the wine, as I have said, old and rare; and everything went off to perfection. The Farrel-Austins, who were only relations, and not of first importance as county people, sat about the centre of the table, which was the least important place; and opposite to them was Giovanna, who had been put under the charge of old Dr. Richard, to keep her in order, a duty to which he devoted all his faculties. Everything went on perfectly well. The dinner proceeded solemnly, grandly, to its conclusion. Grace—that curious, ill-timed, after-dinner grace which comes just at the daintiest moment of the feast—was duly said; the fruits were being served, forced fruits of every procurable kind, one of the most costly parts of the entertainment at that

season; and a general bustle of expectation prepared the way for certain congratulatory and friendly speeches, the welcome of his great neighbours to the young Squire, which was the real object of the assembly. Lord Kingsborough even had cleared his throat for the first time —a signal which his wife heard at the other end, and understood as an intimation that quietness was to be enforced, to which she replied by stopping, to set a good example, in the midst of a sentence. He cleared his throat again, the great man, and was almost on his legs. He was by Miss Susan's side, in the place of honour. He was a stout man, requiring some pulling up after dinner when his chair was comfortable—and he had actually put forth one foot, and made his first effort to rise, for the third time clearing his throat—

When——an interruption occurred never to be forgotten in the annals of Whiteladies. Suddenly there was heard a patter of small feet, startling the company; and suddenly a something, a pigmy, a tiny figure, made itself visible in the centre of the table. It stood up beside a great pyramid of flowers, a living decoration, with a little flushed rose-face and flaxen curls showing above the mass of greenery. The great people at the head and the foot of the table stood breathless during the

commotion and half-scuffle in the centre of the room which attended this apparition. "What is it?" everybody asked. After that first moment of excited curiosity, it became apparent that it was a child who had been suddenly lifted by some one into that prominent place. The little creature stood still a moment, frightened; then, audibly prompted, woke to its duty. It plucked from its small head a small velvet cap with a white feather, and gave forth its tiny shout, which rang into the echoes,

"Vive M. 'Erbert! vive M. 'Erbert!" cried little Jean, turning round and round, and waving his cap on either side of him. Vague excitement and delight, and sense of importance, and hopes of sugar-plums, inspired the child. He gave forth his little shout with his whole heart, his blue eyes dancing, his little cheeks flushed; and I leave the reader to imagine what a sensation little Jean's unexpected appearance and still more unexpected shout produced in the decorous splendour of the great hall.

"Who is it?" "What is it?" "What does it mean?" "Who is the child?" "What does he say?" cried everybody. There got up such a commotion and flutter as dispelled in a moment the respectful silence

which had been preparing for Lord Kingsborough. Every guest appealed to his or her neighbour for information, and—except the very few too well-informed, like Dr. Richard, who guilty and self-reproachful, asking himself how he could have prevented it, and what he should say to Miss Susan, sat silent, incapable of speech —every one sent back the question. Giovanna, calm and radiant, alone replied. "It is the next who will succeed," she cried, sending little rills of knowledge on either side of her. "It is Jean Austin, the little heir."

Lord Kingsborough was taken aback, as was natural; but he was a good-natured man, and fond of children. "God bless us!" he said. "Miss Austin, you don't mean to tell me the boy's married, and that's his heir?"

"It is the next of kin," said Miss Susan with white lips; "no more *his* heir than I am, but *the* heir if Herbert had not lived. Lord Kingsborough, you will forgive the interruption; you will not disappoint us. He is no more Herbert's heir than I am!" again she cried with a shiver of agitation.

It was the Hon. Mr. Skindle who supported her on the other side; and having heard that there was madness in the Austin family, that gentleman was afraid. "'Gad, she looked as if she could have murdered somebody!"

he confided afterwards to the friend who drove him home.

"Not *his* heir, but *the* heir," said Lord Kingsborough good-humouredly, "a fine distinction!" and as he was a kind soul, he made another prodigious effort, and got himself out of his seat. He made a very friendly, nice little speech, saying that the very young gentleman who preceded him had indeed taken the wind out of his sails, and forestalled what he had to say; but that, nevertheless, as an old neighbour and family friend, he desired to echo in honest English, and with every cordial sentiment, their little friend's effective speech, and to wish to Herbert Austin, now happily restored to his home in perfect health and vigour, everything, &c., &c. He went on to tell the assembly what they knew very well; that he had known Herbert's father and grandfather, and had the happiness of a long acquaintance with the admirable ladies who had so long represented the name of Austin among them; and to each he gave an appropriate compliment. In short, his speech composed the disturbed assembly, and brought everything back to the judicious level of a great dinner; and Herbert made his reply with modest self-possession, and the course of affairs, momentarily interrupted, flowed on again accord-

ing to the programme. But in the centre of the table, where the less important people sat, Giovanna and the child were the centre of attraction. She caught every one's eye, now that attention had been called to her. After he had made the necessary sensation, she took little Jean down from the table, and set him on the carpet, where he ran from one to another, collecting the offerings which every one was ready to give him. Sophy and Kate got hold of him in succession, and crammed him with bonbons, while their father glared at the child across the table. He made his way even as far as Lord Kingsborough, who took him on his knee and patted his curly head. "But the little chap should be in bed," said the kind potentate, who had a great many of his own. Jean escaped a moment after, and ran behind the chairs in high excitement to the next who called him. It was only when the ladies left the room that Giovanna caught him, and swinging him up to her white shoulder, which was not half so much uncovered as Kate's and Sophy's, carried him away triumphant, shouting once more "Vive M. 'Erbert!" from that eminence, as he finally disappeared at the great door.

This was Giovanna's first appearance in public, but it was a memorable one. Poor old Dr. Richard, half

weeping, secured Everard as soon as the ladies were gone, and poured his pitiful story into his ears.

"What could I do, Mr. Austin?" cried the poor little, pretty old gentleman. "She had him up before I could think what she was going to do; and you cannot use violence to a lady, sir, you cannot use violence, especially on a festive occasion like this. I should have been obliged to restrain her forcibly, if at all, and what could I do?"

"I am sure you did everything that was necessary," said Everard with a smile. She was capable of setting Dr. Richard himself on the table, if it had served her purpose, instead of being restrained by him, was what he thought.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE evening came to an end at last, like all others. The great people went first, as became them, filling the rural roads with the ponderous rumble of their great carriages and gleam of their lamps. The whole neighbourhood was astir. A little crowd of village people had collected round the gates to see the ladies in their fine dresses, and to catch the distant echo of the festivities. There was quite an excitement among them, as carriage after carriage rolled away. The night was soft and warm and light, the moon invisible, but yet shedding from behind the clouds a subdued lightness into the atmosphere. As the company dwindled, and ceremony diminished, a group gradually collected in the great porch, and at last this group dwindled to the family party and the Farrel-Austins, who were the last to go away. This was by no means the desire of their father, who had derived little pleasure from the entertain-

ment. None of those ulterior views which Kate and Sophy had discussed so freely between themselves had been communicated to their father, and he saw nothing but the celebration of his own downfall, and the funeral of his hopes, in this feast, which was all to the honour of Herbert. Consequently, he had been eager to get away at the earliest moment possible, and would even have preceded Lord Kingsborough, could he have moved his daughters, who did not share his feelings. On the contrary, the display which they had just witnessed had produced a very sensible effect upon Kate and Sophy. They were very well off, but they did not possess half the riches of Whiteladies; and the grandeur of the stately old hall, and the importance of the party, impressed these young women of the world. Sophy, who was the youngest, was naturally the least affected; but Kate, now five-and-twenty, and beginning to perceive very distinctly that all is vanity, was more moved than I can say. In the intervals of livelier intercourse, and especially during that moment in the drawing-room when the gentlemen were absent—a moment pleasing in its calm to the milder portion of womankind, but which fast young ladies seldom endure with patience—Kate made pointed appeals to her sister's proper feelings.

"If you let all this slip through your fingers, I shall despise you," she said with vehemence.

"Go in for it yourself, then," whispered the bold Sophy; "I shan't object." But even Sophy was impressed. Her first interest, Lord Alf, had disappeared long ago, and had been succeeded by others, all very willing to amuse themselves and her, as much as she pleased, but all disappearing in their turn to the regions above, or the regions below, equally out of Sophy's reach, whom circumstances shut out from the haunts of blacklegs and sporting men, as well as from the upper world, to which the Lord Alfs of creation belong by nature. Still it was not in Sophy's nature to be so wise as Kate. She was not tired of amusing herself, and had not begun yet to pursue her gaieties with a definite end. Sophy told her friends quite frankly that her sister was "on the look-out." "She has had her fun, and she wants to settle down," the younger said with admirable candour, to the delight and much amusement of her audiences from the Barracks. For this, these gentlemen well knew, though both reasonable and virtuous in a man, is not so easily managed in the case of a lady. "By Jove! I shouldn't wonder if she did," was their generous comment. "She has had her fun, by Jove!

and who does she suppose would have *her?*" Yet the best of girls, and the freshest and sweetest, do have these heroes, after a great deal more "fun" than ever could have been within the reach of Kate; for there are disabilities of women which cannot be touched by legislation, and to which the most strong-minded must submit.

However, Sophy and Kate, as I have said, were both moved to exertion by this display of all the grandeur of Whiteladies. They kept their father fuming and fretting outside, while they lingered in the porch with Reine and Herbert. The whole youthful party was there, including Everard and Giovanna, who had at last permitted poor little Jean to be put to bed, but who was still excited by her demonstration, and the splendid company of which she had formed a part.

"How they are dull, these great ladies!" she cried; "but not more dull than ces messieurs, who thought I was mad. Mon Dieu! because I was happy about M. Herbert, and that he had come home!"

"It was very grand of you to be glad," cried Sophy. "Bertie, you have gone and put everybody out. Why did you get well, sir? Papa pretends to be pleased too, but he would like to give you strychnine or something.

Oh, it wouldn't do us any good, we are only girls ; and I think you have a better right than papa."

"Thanks for taking my part," said Herbert, who was a little uncertain how to take this very frank address. A man seldom thinks his own problematical death an amusing incident ; but still he felt that to laugh was the right thing to do.

"Oh, of course we take your part," cried Sophy. "We expect no end of fun from you, now you've come back. I am so sick of all those Barrack parties ; but you will always have something going on, won't you? And Reine, you must ask us. How delicious a dance would be in the hall! Bertie, remember you are to go to Ascot with *us;* you are *our* cousin, not any one else's. When one is related to the hero of the moment, one is not going to let one's glory drop. Promise, Bertie! you go with us?"

"I am quite willing, if you want me," said Herbert.

"Oh, if we want you!—of course we want you—we want you always," cried Sophy. "Why, you are the lion ; we are proud of you. We shall want to let everybody see that you don't despise your poor relations, that you remember we are your cousins, and used to play with you. Don't you recollect, Bertie? Kate and

Reine used to be the friends always, because they were the steadiest; and you and me—we were the ones who got into scrapes!" cried Sophy. This, to tell the truth, was a very rash statement; for Herbert, always delicate, had not been in the habit of getting into scrapes. But all the more for this, he was pleased with the idea.

"Yes," he said half doubtfully, "I recollect;" but his recollections were not clear enough to enter into details.

"Come, let us get into a scrape again," cried Sophy; "it is such a lovely night. Let us send the carriage on in front, and walk. Come with us, won't you? After a party, it is so pleasant to have a walk; and we have been such swells to-night. Come, Bertie, let's run on, and bring ourselves down."

"Sophy, you madcap! I daresay the night air is not good for him," said Kate.

Upon which Sophy broke forth into the merriest laughter. "As if Bertie cared for the night air! Why, he looks twice as strong as any of us. Will you come?"

"With all my heart," said Herbert; "it is the very thing after such a tremendous business as Aunt Susan's dinner. This is not the kind of entertainment I mean to give. We shall leave the swells, as you say, to take care of themselves."

"And ask me!" said bold Sophy, running out into the moonlight, which just then got free of the clouds. She was in high spirits, and pleased with the decided beginning she had made. In her white dress, with her white shoes twinkling over the dark cool greenness of the grass, she looked like a fairy broken forth from the woods. "Who will run a race with me to the end of the lane?" she cried, pirouetting round and round the lawn. How pretty she was, how gay, how light-hearted—a madcap, as her sister said, who stood in the shadow of the porch laughing, and bade Sophy recollect that she would ruin her shoes.

"And you can't run in high heels," said Kate.

"Can't I?" cried Sophy. "Come, Bertie, come!" They nearly knocked down Mr. Farrel-Austin, who stood outside smoking his cigar, and swearing within himself, as they rushed out through the little gate. The carriage was proceeding at a foot pace, its lamps making two bright lines of light along the wood, the coachman swearing internally as much as his master. The others followed more quietly—Kate, Reine, and Everard. Giovanna, yawning, had withdrawn some time before.

"Sophy, really, is too great a romp," said Kate; "she is always after some nonsense; and now we shall

never be able to overtake them, to talk to Bertie about coming to the Hatch. Reine, you must settle it. We do so want you to come; consider how long it is since we have seen you, and of course everybody wants to see you; so unless we settle at once we shall miss our chance. Everard must come too; we have been so long separated; and perhaps," said Kate, dropping her voice, "papa may have been disagreeable; but that don't make any difference to us. Say when you will come; we are all cousins together, and we ought to be friends. What a blessing when there are no horrible questions of property between people!" said Kate, who had so much sense. "*Now* it don't matter to any one, except for friendship, who is next of kin."

"Bertie has won," said Sophy, calling out to them. "Fancy! I thought I was sure, such a short distance; men can stay better than we can," said the well-informed young woman; "but for a little bit like this, the girl ought to win."

"Since you have come back, let us settle about when they are to come," said Kate; and then there ensued a lively discussion. They clustered all together at the end of the lane, in the clear space where there were no shadowing trees—the two young men acting as shadows,

the girls all distinct in their pretty light dresses, which the moon whitened and brightened. The consultation was very animated, and diversified by much mirth and laughter, Sophy being wild, as she said, with excitement, with the stimulation of the race, and of the night air and the freedom. "After a grand party of swells, where one has to behave one's self," she said, "one always goes wild." And she fell to waltzing about the party. Everard was the only one of them who had any doubt as to the reality of Sophy's madcap mood; the others accepted it with the naïve confidence of innocence. They said to each other, what a merry girl she was! when at last, moved by Mr. Farrel-Austin's sulks and the determination of the coachman, the girls permitted themselves to be placed in the carriage. "Recollect Friday!" they both cried, kissing Reine, and giving the most cordial pressure of the hand to Herbert. The three who were left stood and looked after the carriage as it set off along the moonlit road. Reine had taken her brother's arm. She gave Everard no opportunity to resume that interrupted conversation on board the steamboat. And Kate and Sophy had not been at all attentive to their cousin, who was quite as nearly related to them as Bertie, so that if he was slightly misanthropical and disposed to find

fault, it can scarcely be said that he had no justification. They all strolled along together slowly, enjoying the soft evening and the suppressed moonlight, which was now dim again, struggling faintly through a mysterious labyrinth of cloud.

"I had forgotten what nice girls they were," said Herbert; "Sophy especially; so kind and so genial and unaffected. How foolish one is when one is young! I don't think I liked them, even, when we were last here."

"They are sometimes too kind," said Everard, shrugging his shoulders; but neither of the others took any notice of what he said.

"One is so much occupied with one's self when one is young," said middle-aged Reine, already over twenty, and feeling all the advantages which age bestows.

"Do you think it is that?" said Herbert. He was much affected by the cordiality of his cousins, and moved by many concurring causes to a certain sentimentality of mind; and he was not indisposed for a little of that semi-philosophical talk which sounds so elevating and so improving at his age.

"Yes," said Reine with confidence; "one is so little sure of one's self, one is always afraid of having done amiss; things you say sound so silly when you think

them over. I blush sometimes now when I am quite alone to think how silly I must have seemed; and that prevents you doing justice to others; but I like Kate best."

"And I like Sophy best. She has no nonsense about her; she is so frank and so simple. Which is Everard for? On the whole, there is no doubt about it, English girls have a something, a je ne sais quoi——"

"I can't give any opinion," said Everard laughing. "After your visit to the Hatch you will be able to decide. And have you thought what Aunt Susan will say, within the first week, almost before you have been seen at home?"

"By Jove! I forgot Aunt Susan!" cried Herbert with a sudden pause; then he laughed, trying to feel the exquisite fun of asking Aunt Susan's permission, while they were so independent of her; but this scarcely answered just at first. "Of course," he added, with an attempt at self-assertion, "one cannot go on consulting Aunt Susan's opinion for ever."

"But the first week!" Everard had all the delight of mischief in making them feel the subordination in which they still stood in spite of themselves. He went on laughing. "I would not say anything about it to-night. She is not half pleased with Madame Jean, as

they call her. I hope Madame Jean has been getting it hot. Everything went off perfectly well by a miracle, but that woman has nearly spoiled it by her nonsense and her boy——"

"Whom do you call that woman?" said Herbert coldly. "I think Madame Jean did just what a warm-hearted person would do. She did not wait for mere ceremony or congratulations pre-arranged. For my part," said Herbert stiffly, "I never admired any one so much. She is the most beautiful, glorious creature!"

"There was no one there so pretty," said innocent Reine.

"Pretty! she is not pretty: she is splendid! she is beautiful! By Jove! to see her with her arm raised, and that child on her shoulder—it's like a picture! If you will laugh," said Herbert pettishly, "don't laugh in that offensive way! What have they done to you, and why are you so disagreeable to-night?"

"Am I disagreeable?" said Everard, laughing again. It was all he could do to keep from being angry, and he felt this was the safest way. "Perhaps it is that I am more enlightened than you youngsters. However beautiful a woman may be (and I don't deny she's very handsome), I can see when she's playing a part."

"What part is she playing?" cried Herbert hotly. Reine was half frightened by his vehemence, and provoked, as he was, by Everard's disdainful tone; but she pressed her brother's arm to restrain him, fearful of a quarrel, as girls are so apt to be.

"I suppose you will say we are all playing our parts; and so we are," said Reine. "Bertie, you have been the hero to-night, and we are all your satellites for the moment. Come in quick, it feels chilly. I don't suppose even Everard would say Sophy was playing a part except her natural one," she added with a laugh.

Everard was taken by surprise. He echoed her laugh with all the imbecility of astonishment. "You believe in them too," he said to her in an aside, then added, "No, only her natural part," with a tone which Herbert found as offensive as the other. Herbert himself was in a state of flattered self-consciousness which made him look upon every word said against his worshippers as an assault upon himself. Perhaps the lad being younger than his years, was still at the age when a boy is more in love with himself than any one else, and loves others according to their appreciation of that self which bulks so largely in his own eyes. Giovanna's homage to him, and Sophy's enthusiasm of cousinship, and the flattering

look in all these fine eyes, had intoxicated Herbert. He could not but feel that they were above all criticism, these young, fair women, who did such justice to his own excellencies. As for any suggestion that their regard for him was not genuine, it was as great an insult to him as to them, and brought him down, in the most humbling way, from the pedestal on which they had elevated him. Reine's hand patting softly on his arm kept him silent, but he felt that he could knock down Everard with pleasure, and fumes of anger and self-exaltation mounted into his head.

"Don't quarrel, Bertie," Reine whispered in his ear.

"Quarrel! he is not worth quarrelling with. He is jealous, I suppose, because I am more important than he is," Herbert said, stalking through the long passages which were still all bright with lights and flowers. Everard, hanging back out of hearing, followed the two young figures with his eyes through the windings of the passage. Herbert held his head high, indignant. Reine, with both her hands on his arm, soothed and calmed her brother. They were both resentful of his sour tone and what he had said.

"I dare say they think I am jealous," Everard said to himself with a laugh that was not merry, and went away

to his own room, and beginning to arrange his things for departure, meaning to leave next day. He had no need to stay there to swell Herbert's triumph, he who had so long acted as nurse to him without fee or reward. Not quite without reward either, he thought, after all, rebuking himself, and held up his hand and looked at it intently, with a smile stealing over his face. Why should he interfere to save Herbert from his own vanity and folly? Why should he subject himself to the usual fate of Mentors, pointing out Scylla on the one side and Charybdis on the other? If the frail vessel was determined to be wrecked, what had he, Everard, to do with it? Let the boy accomplish his destiny, who cared? and then what could Reine do but take refuge with her natural champion, he whom she herself had appointed to stand in her place, and who had his own score against her still unacquitted? It was evidently to his interest to keep out of the way, to let things go as they would. "And I'll back Giovanna against Sophy," he said to himself, half jealous, half laughing, as he went to sleep.

As for Herbert, he lounged into the great hall, where some lights were still burning, with his sister, and found Miss Susan there, pale with fatigue and the excitement

past, but triumphant. "I hope you have not tired yourself out," she said. "It was like those girls to lead you out into the night air, to give you a chance of taking cold. Their father would like nothing better than to see you laid up again; but I don't give them credit for any scheme. They are too feather-brained for anything but folly."

"Do you mean our cousins Sophy and Kate?" said Herbert with some solemnity, and an unconscious attempt to overawe Miss Susan, who was not used to anything of this kind, and was unable to understand what he meant.

"I mean the Farrel-Austin girls," she said. "Riot and noise and nonsense is their very atmosphere. I hope you do not like these kinds of goings-on, Reine?"

The brother and sister looked at each other. "You have always disliked the Farrel-Austins," said Herbert, bravely putting himself in the breach. "I don't know why, Aunt Susan. But we have no quarrel with the girls. They are very nice and friendly. Indeed, Reine and I have promised to go to them on Friday, for two or three days."

He was three-and-twenty, he was acknowledged master of the house; but Herbert felt a certain tremor steal over

him, and stood up before her with a strong sense of valour and daring as he said these words.

"Going to them on Friday—to the Farrel-Austins, for three or four days! then you do not mean even to go to your own parish church on your first Sunday? Herbert," said Miss Susan indignantly, "you will break Augustine's heart."

"No, no, we did not say three or four days. I thought of that," said Reine. "We shall return on Saturday. Don't be angry, Aunt Susan. They were very kind, and we thought it was no harm."

Herbert gave her an indignant glance. It was on his lips to say, "It does not matter whether Aunt Susan is angry or not," but looking at her, he thought better of it. "Yes," he said after a pause, "we shall return on Saturday. They were very kind, as Reine says, and how visiting our cousins could possibly involve any harm——"

"That is your own affair," said Miss Susan; "I know what you mean, Herbert, and of course you are right, you are not children any longer, and must choose your own friends; well! Before you go, however, I should like to settle everything. To-night is my last night. Yes, yes, it is too late to discuss that now. I don't mean to say more at present. It went off very well, very

pleasantly, but for that ridiculous interruption of Giovanna's——"

"I did not think it was ridiculous," said Herbert. "It was very pretty. Does Giovanna displease you too?"

Once more Reine pressed his arm. He was not always going to be coerced like this. If Miss Susan wants to be unjust and ungenerous, he was man enough, he felt, to meet her to the face.

"It was very ridiculous, I thought," she said with a sigh, "and I told her so. I don't suppose she meant any harm. She is very ignorant, and knows nothing about the customs of society. Thank heaven, she can't stay very long now."

"Why can't she stay?" cried Herbert, alarmed. "Aunt Susan, I don't know what has come over you. You used to be so kind to everybody, but now—And it is the people I particularly like you are so furious against. Why? those girls, who are as pretty and as pleasant as possible, and just the kind of companions Reine wants, and Madame Jean, who is the most charming person I ever saw in this house. Ignorant! I think she is very accomplished. How she sang last night, and what an eye she has for the picturesque! I never ad-

mired Whiteladies so much as this morning, when she took us over it. Aunt Susan, don't be so cross. Are you disappointed in Reine, or in me, that you are so hard upon the people we like most?"

"The people you like most?" cried Miss Susan, aghast.

"Yes, Aunt Susan, I like them too," said Reine, bravely putting herself by her brother's side. I believe they both thought it was a most chivalrous and high-spirited thing they were doing, rejecting experience and taking rashly what seemed to them the weaker side. The side of the accused against the judge, the side of the young against the old. It seemed so natural to do that. The two stood together in their foolishness in the old hall, all decorated in their honour, and confronted the dethroned queen of it with a smile. She stood baffled and thunderstruck, gazing at them and scarcely knew what to say.

"Well, children, well!" she managed to get out at last. "You are no longer under me, you must choose your own friends; but God help you, what is to become of you if these are the kind of people you like best!"

They both laughed softly; though Reine had compunctions, they were not afraid. "You must confess at

least that we have good taste," said Herbert; "two very pretty people, and one beautiful. I should have been much happier with Sophy at one hand and Madame Jean on the other, instead of those two swells, as Sophy calls them."

"Sophy, as you call her, would give her head for their notice," cried Miss Susan, indignant; "two of the best women in the county, and the most important families."

Herbert shrugged his shoulders. "They did not amuse me," he said, "but perhaps I am stupid. I prefer the foolish Sophy and the undaunted Madame Jean."

Miss Susan left them with a cold good night to see all the lights put out, which was important in the old house. She was so angry that it almost eased her of her personal burden; but Reine, I confess, felt a thrill of panic as she went up the oak stairs. Scylla and Charybdis! She did not identify Herbert's danger, but in her heart there worked a vague premonition of danger, and without knowing why, she was afraid.

CHAPTER IX.

"GOING away?" said Giovanna.

"M. 'Erbert, you go away already? is it that Viteladies is what you call dull? You have been here so short of time, you do not yet know."

"We are going only for a day; at least, not quite two days," said Reine.

"For a day! but a day, two days is long. Why go at all?" said Giovanna. "We are very well here. I will sing, if that pleases to you. M. 'Erbert, when you are so long absent, you should not go away to-morrow, the next day. Madame Suzanne will think, 'They love me not.'"

"That would be nonsense," said Herbert; "besides, you know I cannot be kept in one place at my age, whatever old ladies may think."

"Ah! nor young ladies neither," said Giovanna. "You are homme, you have the freedom to do what you will, I know it. Me, I am but a woman, I can never have this freedom; but I comprehend and I

admire. Yes, M. 'Erbert, that goes without saying. One does not put the eagle into a cage."

And Giovanna gave a soft little sigh. She was seated in one of her favourite easy chairs, thrown back in it in an attitude of delicious, easy repose. She had no mind for the work with which Reine employed herself, and which all the women Herbert ever knew had indulged in, to his annoyance, and often envy; for an invalid's weary hours would have been the better often of such feminine solace, and the young man hated it all the more that he had often been tempted to take to it, had his pride permitted. But Giovanna had no mind for this pretty cheat, that looked like occupation. In her own room she worked hard at her own dresses and those of the child, but down-stairs she sat with her large, shapely white hands in her lap, in all the luxury of doing nothing; and this peculiarity delighted Herbert. He was pleased, too, with what she said; he liked to imagine that he was an eagle who could not be shut into a cage, and to feel his immense superiority, as man, over the women who were never free to do as they liked, and for whom (he thought) such an indulgence would not be good. He drew himself up unconsciously, and felt older, taller. "No," he said, "of course it would be too foolish

of Aunt Susan or any one to expect me to be guided by what she thinks right."

"Me, I do not speak for you," said Giovanna; "I speak for myself. I am disappointed, me. It will be dull when you are gone. Yes, yes, Monsieur Herbert, we are selfish, we other women. When you go we are dull; we think not of you, but of ourselves, n'est-ce pas, Mademoiselle Reine? I am frank. I confess it. You will be very happy; you will have much pleasure; but me, I shall be dull. Voilà tout!"

I need not say that this frankness captivated Herbert. It is always more pleasant to have our absence regretted by others, selfishly, for the loss it is to them, than unselfishly on our account only; so that this profession of indifference to the pleasure of your departing friend, in consideration of the loss to yourself, is the very highest compliment you can pay him. Herbert felt this to the bottom of his heart. He was infinitely flattered and touched by the thought of a superiority so delightful; and he had not been used to it. He had been accustomed, indeed, to be in his own person the centre of a great deal of care and anxiety, everybody thinking of him for his sake; but to have it recognised that his presence or absence made a place dull or the reverse,

and affected his surroundings, not for his sake but theirs, was a great rise in the world to Herbert. He felt it necessary to be very friendly and attentive to Giovanna, by way of consoling her. "After all, it will not be very long," he said; "from Friday morning to Saturday night. I like to humour the old ladies, and they make a point of our being at home for Sunday; though I don't know how Sophy and Kate will like it, Reine."

"They will not like it at all," said Giovanna. "They want you to be to them, to amuse them, to make them happy; so do I, the same. When they come here, those young ladies, we shall not be friends; we shall fight," she said with a laugh. "Ah, they are more clever than me, they will win; though if we could fight with the hands like men, I should win. I am more strong."

"It need not come so far as that," said Herbert, complaisant and delighted. "You are all very kind, I am sure, and think more of me than I deserve."

"I am kind—to me, not to you, M. 'Erbert," said Giovanna; "when I tell you it is dull, dull à mourir the moment you go away!"

"Yet you have spent a good many months here without Herbert, Madame Jean," said Reine; "if it had been so dull, you might have gone away."

"Ah, mademoiselle! where could I have gone to? I am not rich like you; I have not parents that love me. If I go home now," cried Giovanna, with a laugh, "it will be to the room behind the shop where my belle-mère sits all the day, where they cook the dinner, where I am the one that is in the way, always. I have no money, no people to care for me. Even little Jean they take from me. They say, 'Tenez, Gi'vanna! she has not the ways of children.' Have not I the ways of children, M. 'Erbert? That is what they would say to me, if I went to what you call 'ome."

"Reine," said Herbert in an undertone, "how can you be so cruel, reminding the poor thing how badly off she is? I hope you will not think of going away," he added, turning to Giovanna. "Reine and I will be too glad that you should stay; and as for your flattering appreciation of our society, I for one am very grateful," said the young fellow. "I am very happy to be able to do anything to make Whiteladies pleasant to you."

Miss Susan came in as he said this, with Everard, who was going away; but she was too much preoccupied by her own cares to attend to what her nephew was saying. Everard appreciated the position more clearly. He saw the grateful look with which Giovanna

turned her beautiful eyes to the young master of the house, and he saw the pleased vanity and complaisance in Herbert's face. "What an ass he is!" Everard thought to himself; and then he quoted privately with rueful comment—

> "'On him each courtier's eye was bent,
> To him each lady's look was lent:'

all because the young idiot had Whiteladies, and was the head of the house!" "Bravo, Herbert, old boy," he said aloud, though there was nothing particularly appropriate in the speech, "you are having your innings. I hope you'll make the most of them. But now that I am no longer wanted, I am going off. I suppose when it is warm enough for water parties, I shall come into fashion again; Sophy and Kate will manage that."

"Well, Everard, if I were you I should have more pride," said Miss Susan. "I would not allow myself to be taken up and thrown aside as these girls please. What you can see in them baffles me. They are not very pretty. They are very loud, and fast, and noisy—"

"I think so too!" cried Giovanna, clapping her hands. "They are my enemies: they take you away, M. 'Erbert and Mademoiselle Reine. They make it dull here."

"Only for a day," said Herbert, bending over her, his eyes melting and glowing with that delightful suffusion of satisfied vanity which with so many men represents love. "I could not stay long away if I would," said the young man in a lower tone. He was quite captivated by her frank demonstrations of personal loss, and believed them to the bottom of his heart.

Miss Susan threw a curious, half-startled look at them, and Reine raised her head from her embroidery; but both of these ladies had something of their own on their minds which occupied them, and closed their eyes to other matters. Reine was secretly uneasy that Everard should go away; that there should have been no explanation between them; and perceived that his tone had in it a certain suppressed bitterness. What had she done to him? Nothing. She had been occupied with her brother, as was natural; any one else would have been the same. Everard's turn could come at any time, she said to herself, with a girl's unconscious arrogance, when sure of having the upper hand. But she was uneasy that he should go away.

"I don't want to interfere with your pleasures, Herbert," said Miss Susan, "but I must settle what I am to do. Our cottage is ready for us, everything is arranged;

and I want to give up my charge to you, and go away."

"To go away!" the brother and sister repeated together with dismay.

"Of course; that is what it must come to. When you were under age it was different. I was your guardian, Herbert, and you were my children."

"Aunt Susan," cried Reine, coming up to her with eager tenderness, "we are your children still."

"And I—am not at all sure whether it will suit me to take up all you have been doing," said Herbert. "It suits you, why should we change; and how could Reine manage the house? Aunt Susan, it is unkind to come down upon us like this. Leave us a little time to get used to it. What do you want with a cottage? Of course you must like Whiteladies best."

"Oh, Aunt Susan! what he says is not so selfish as it sounds," said Reine. "Why—why should you go?"

"We are all selfish," said Herbert, "as Madame Jean says. She wishes us to stay because it is dull without us" ("Bien, très dull," said Giovanna), "and we want you to stay because we are not up to the work and don't understand it. Never mind the cottage; there is plenty

of room in Whiteladies for all of us. Aunt Susan, why should you be disagreeable? Don't go away."

"I wish it; I wish it," she said in a low tone; "let me go!"

"But we don't wish it," cried Reine, kissing her in triumph, "and neither does Augustine. Oh, Aunt Austine, listen to her, speak for us! You don't wish to go away from Whiteladies, away from your home?"

"No," said Augustine, who had come in in her noiseless way. "I do not intend to leave Whiteladies," she went on, with serious composure; "but, Herbert, I have something to say to you. It is more important than anything else. You must marry; you must marry at once; I don't wish any time to be lost. I wish you to have an heir, whom I shall bring up. I will devote myself to him. I am fifty-seven; there is no time to be lost; but with care I might live twenty years. The women of our house are long-lived. Susan is sixty, and she is as active as any one of you; and for an object like this, one would spare no pains to lengthen one's days. You must marry, Herbert. This has now become the chief object of my life."

The young members of the party, unable to restrain themselves, laughed at this solemn address. Miss Susan

turned away impatient, and sitting down, pulled out the knitting of which lately she had done so little. But as for Augustine, her countenance preserved a perfect gravity. She saw nothing laughable in what she said. "I excuse you," she said very seriously, "for you cannot see into my heart and read what is there. Nor does Susan understand me. She is taken up with the cares of this world and the foolishness of riches. She thinks a foolish display like that of last night is more important. But, Herbert, listen to me; you and your true welfare have been my first thought and my first prayer for years, and this is my recommendation, my command to you. You must marry—and without any unnecessary delay."

"But the lady?" said Herbert, laughing and blushing; even this very odd address had a pleasurable element in it. It implied a special importance in everything he did; and it pleased the young man, even after such an odd fashion, to lay this flattering unction to his soul.

"The lady!" said Miss Augustine gravely; and then she made a pause. "I have thought a great deal about that, and there is more than one whom I could suggest to you; but I have never married myself, and I might not perhaps be a good judge. It seems the general

opinion that in such matters people should choose for themselves."

All this she said with so profound a gravity that the bystanders, divided between amusement and a kind of awe, held their breath and looked at each other. Miss Augustine had not sat down. She rarely did sit down in the common sitting-room; her hands were too full of occupation. Her church services, now that the Chantry was opened, her Almshouses prayers, her charities, her universal oversight of her pensioners, filled up all her time, and bound her to hours as strictly as if she had been a cotton-spinner in a mill. No cotton-spinner worked harder than did this Grey Sister; from morning to night her time was portioned out. I do not venture to say how many miles she walked daily, rain or shine; from Whiteladies to the Almshouses, to the church, to the Almshouses again; or how many hours she spent absorbed in that strange matter-of-fact devotion which was her way of working for her family. She repeated in her soft tones, "I do not interfere with your choice, Herbert; but what I say is very important. Marry! I wish it above everything else in life." And having said so much, she went away.

"This is very solemn," said Herbert with a laugh;

but his laugh was not like the merriment into which, by-and-by, the others burst forth, and which half offended the young man. Reine, for her part, ran to the piano when Miss Augustine disappeared, and burst forth into a quaint little French ditty, sweet and simple, of old Norman rusticity.

"A chaque rose que j'effeuille
Marie-toi, car il est temps,"

the girl sang. But Miss Susan did not laugh, and Herbert did not care to see anything ridiculed in which he had such an important share. After all, it was natural enough, he said to himself, that such advice should be given with great gravity to one on whose acts so much depended. He did not see what there was to laugh about. Reine was absurd with her songs. There was always one of them which came in pat to the moment. Herbert almost thought that this light-minded repetition of Augustine's advice was impertinent both to her and himself. And thus a little gloom had come over his brow.

"Messieurs et mesdames," said Giovanna suddenly, "you laugh, but, if you reflect, ma sœur has reason. She thinks, Here is Monsieur 'Erbert, young and strong, but yet there are things which happen to the strongest;

and here, on the other part, is a little boy, a little, little boy, who is not English, whose mother is nothing but a foreigner, who is the heir. This gives her the panique. And for me too, M. 'Erbert, I say with Mademoiselle Reine, 'Marie-toi, car il est temps.' Yes, truly! although little Jean is my boy, I say mariez-vous with my heart."

"How good you are! how generous you are! Strange that you should be the only one to see it," said Herbert, for the moment despising all the people belonging to him, who were so opaque, who did not perceive the necessities of the position. He himself saw those necessities well enough, and that he should marry was the first and most important. To tell the truth, he could not see even that Augustine's anxiety was of an exaggerated description. It was not a thing to make laughter and ridiculous jokes and songs about.

Giovanna did not desert her post during that day. She did not always lead the conversation, nor make herself so important in it as she had done at first, but she was always there, putting in a word when necessary, ready to come to Herbert's assistance, to amuse him when there was occasion, to flatter him with bold, frank speeches, in which there was always a subtle compliment

involved. Everard took his leave shortly after, with farewells in which there was a certain consciousness that he had not been treated quite as he ought to have been. "Till I come into fashion again," he said, with the laugh which began to sound harsh to Reine's ears, "I am better at home in my own den, where I can be as sulky as I please. When I am wanted you know where to find me." Reine thought he looked at her when he said this with reproach in his eyes.

"I think you are wanted now," said Miss Susan; "there are many things I wished to consult you about. I wish you would not go away."

But he was obstinate. "No, no; there is nothing for me to do," he said; "no journeys to make, no troubles to encounter. You are all settled at home in safety; and when I am wanted you know where to find me," he added, this time holding out his hand to Reine, and looking at her very distinctly. Poor Reine felt herself on the edge of a very sea of troubles; everybody around her seemed to have something in their thoughts beyond her divining. Miss Susan meant more than she could fathom, and there lurked a purpose in Giovanna's beautiful eyes, which Reine began to be dimly conscious of, but could not explain to herself. How could he leave

her to steer her course among these undeveloped perils? and how could she call him back when he was "wanted," as he said bitterly? She gave him her hand, turning away her head to hide a something, almost a tear, that would come into her eyes, and with a forlorn sense of desertion in her heart; but she was too proud either by look or word to bid Everard stay.

This was on Thursday, and the next day they were to go to the Hatch, so that the interval was not long. Giovanna sang for them in the evening all kinds of popular songs which was the sort of music she knew best, old Flemish ballads, and French and Italian canzoni; those songs of which every hamlet possesses one special to itself. "For I am not educated," she said; "Mademoiselle must see that. I do all this by the ear. It is not music; it is nothing but ignorance. These are the chants du peuple, and I am nothing but one of the peuple, me. I am très-peuple. I never pretend otherwise. I do not wish to deceive you, M. 'Erbert, nor Mademoiselle."

"Deceive us!" cried Herbert. "If we could imagine such a thing, we should be dolts indeed."

Giovanna raised her head and looked at him, then turned to Miss Susan, whose knitting had dropped on

her knee, and who, without thought, I think, had turned her eyes upon the group. "You are right, Monsieur 'Erbert," she said, with a strange malicious laugh, "here at least you are quite safe, though there are much of persons who are *traîtres* in the world. No one will deceive you here."

She laughed as she spoke, and Miss Susan clutched at her knitting and buried herself in it, so to speak, not raising her head again for a full hour after, during which time Herbert and Giovanna talked a great deal to each other. And Reine sat by, with an incipient wonder in her mind which she could not quite make out, feeling as if her aunt and herself were one faction, Giovanna and Herbert another; as if there were all sorts of secret threads which she could not unravel, and intentions of which she knew nothing. The sense of strangeness grew on her so, that she could scarcely believe she was in Whiteladies, the home for which she had sighed so long. This kind of disenchantment happens often when the hoped-for becomes actual, but not always with so bewildering a sense of something unrevealed, as that which pressed upon the very soul of Reine.

Next morning Giovanna, with her child on her shoulder, came out to the gate to see them drive away. "You

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will not stay more long than to-morrow," she said. "How we are going to be dull till you come back! Monsieur 'Erbert, Mademoiselle Reine, you promise—not more long than to-morrow! It is two great long days!" She kissed her hand to them, and little Jean waved his cap, and shouted "Vive M. 'Erbert!" as the carriage drove away.

"What a grace she has about her!" said Herbert. "I never saw a woman so graceful. After all, it is a bore to go. It is astonishing how happy one feels, after a long absence, in the mere sense of being at home. I am sorry we promised; of course we must keep our promise now."

"I like it, rather," said Reine, feeling half-ashamed of herself. "Home is not what it used to be; there is something strange, something new; I can't tell what it is. After all, though Madame Jean is very handsome, it is strange she should be there."

"Oh, you object to Madame Jean, do you?" said Herbert. "You women are all alike; Aunt Susan does not like her either. I suppose you cannot help it; the moment a woman is more attractive than others, the moment a man shows that he has got eyes in his head—— But you cannot help it, I suppose. What a

walk she has, and carrying the child like a feather! It is a great bore this visit to the Hatch, and so soon."

"You were pleased with the idea; you were delighted to accept the invitation," said Reine, injudiciously, I must say.

"Bah! one's ideas change; but Sophy and Kate would have been disappointed," said Herbert, with that ineffable look of complaisance in his eyes. And thus from Scylla, which he had left, he drove calmly on to Charybdis; not knowing where he went.

CHAPTER X.

THERE had been great preparations made for Herbert's reception at the Hatch. I say Herbert's—for Reine, though she had been perforce included in the invitation, was not even considered in the matter. After the banquet at Whiteladies the sisters had many consultations on this subject, and there was indeed very little time to do anything. Sophy had been of opinion at first that the more gay his short visit could be made the better Herbert would be pleased, and had contemplated an impromptu dance, and I don't know how many other diversions; but Kate was wiser. It was one good trait in their characters, if there was not very much else, that they acted for each other with much disinterestedness, seldom or never entering into personal rivalry. "Not too much the first time," said Kate; "let him make acquaintance with *us*, that is the chief thing." "But he mightn't care for us," objected Sophy. "Some people have such bad taste." This was immediately after the

Whiteladies dinner, after the moonlight walk and the long drive, when they were safe in the sanctuary of their own rooms. The girls were in their white dressing-gowns, with their hair about their shoulders, and were taking a light refection of cakes and chocolate before going to bed.

"If you choose to study him a little, and take a little pains, of course he will like you," said Kate. "Any man will fall in love with any woman, if she takes trouble enough."

"It is very odd to me," said Sophy, "that with those opinions you should not be married, at your age."

"My dear," said Kate seriously, "plenty of men have fallen in love with me, only they have not been the right kind of men. I have been too fond of fun; and nobody that quite suited has come in my way since I gave up amusing myself. The Barracks so near is very much in one's way," said Kate, with a sigh. "One gets used to such a lot of them about; and you can always have your fun, whatever happens; and till you are driven to it, it seems odd to make a fuss about one. But what *you* have got to do is easy enough. He is as innocent as a baby, and as foolish. No woman ever took the trouble, I should say, to look at him. You have it all in your

own hands. As for Reine, I will look after Reine. She is a suspicious little thing, but I'll keep her out of your way."

"What a bore it is!" said Sophy, with a yawn. "Why should we be obliged to marry more than the men are? It isn't fair. Nobody finds fault with them, though they have dozens of affairs; but we're drawn over the coals for a nothing, a bit of fun. I'm sure I don't want to marry Bertie, or any one. I'd a great deal rather not. So long as one has one's amusement, it's jolly enough."

"If you could always be as young as you are now," said Kate oracularly; "but even you are beginning to be passée, Sophy. It's the pace, you know, as the men say; you need not make faces. The moment you are married you will be a girl again. As for me, I feel a grandmother."

"You *are* old," said Sophy compassionately; "and indeed you ought to go first."

"I am just eighteen months older than you are," said Kate, rousing herself in self-defence, "and with your light hair, you'll go off sooner. Don't be afraid; as soon as I have got you off my hands I shall take care of myself. But look here! What you've got to do is to study Herbert a little. Don't take him up as if he were Jack

or Tom. Study him. There is one thing you never can go wrong in with any of them," said this experienced young woman. "Look as if you thought him the cleverest fellow that ever was; make yourself as great a fool as you can in comparison. That flatters them above everything. Ask his advice, you know, and that sort of thing. The greatest fool I ever knew," said Kate reflectively, "was Fenwick, the adjutant. I made him wild about me by that."

"He would need to be a fool to think you meant it," said Sophy scornfully; "you that have such an opinion of yourself."

"I had too good an opinion of myself to have anything to say to *him*, at least; but it's fun putting them in a state," said Kate, pleased with the recollection. This was a sentiment which her sister fully shared, and they amused themselves with reminiscences of several such dupes ere they separated. Perhaps even the dupes were scarcely such dupes as these young ladies thought; but any how, they had never been, as Kate said, "the right sort of men." Dropmore, &c., were always to the full as knowing as their pretty adversaries, and were not to be beguiled by any such specious pretences. And to tell the truth, I am doubtful how far Kate's science was

genuine. I doubt whether she was unscrupulous enough and good-tempered enough to carry out her own programme; and Sophy certainly was too careless, too feather-brained, for any such scheme. She meant to marry Herbert because his recommendations were great, and because he lay in her way, as it were, and it would be almost a sin not to put forth a hand to appropriate the gifts of Providence; but if it had been necessary to "study" him, as her sister enjoined, or to give great pains to his subjugation, I feel sure that Sophy's patience and resolution would have given way. The charm in the enterprise was that it seemed so easy; Whiteladies was a most desirable object; and Sophy, longing for fresh woods and pastures new, was rather attracted than repelled by the likelihood of having to spend the winters abroad.

Mr. Farrel-Austin, for his part, received the young head of his family with anything but delight. He had been unable, in ordinary civility, to contradict the invitation his daughters had given, but took care to express his sentiments on the subject next day very distinctly—had they cared at all for those sentiments, which I don't think they did. Their schemes, of course, were quite out of his range, and were not communicated to him; nor

was he such a self-denying parent as to have been much consoled for his own loss of the family property by the possibility of one of his daughters stepping into possession of it. He thought it an ill-timed exhibition of their usual love of strangers, and love of company, and growled at them all day long until the time of the arrival, when he absented himself, to their great satisfaction, though it was intended as the crowning evidence of his displeasure. "Papa has been obliged to go out; he is so sorry, but hopes you will excuse him till dinner," Kate said, when the girls came to receive their cousins at the door. "Oh, they won't mind, I am sure," said Sophy. "We shall have them all to ourselves, which will be much jollier." Herbert's brow clouded temporarily, for, though he did not love Mr. Farrel-Austin, he felt that his absence showed a want of that "proper respect" which was due to the head of the house. But under the gay influence of the girls the cloud speedily floated away. They had gone early, by special prayer, as their stay was to be so short; and Kate had made the judicious addition of two men from the barracks to their little luncheon-party. "One for me, and one for Reine," she had said to Sophy, "which will leave you a fair field." The one whom Kate had chosen for herself

was a middle-aged major, with a small property—a man who had hitherto afforded much "fun" to the party generally as a butt, but whose serious attentions Miss Farrel-Austin, at five-and-twenty, did not absolutely discourage. If nothing better came in the way, he might do, she felt. He had a comfortable income and a mild temper, and would not object to "fun." Reine's share was a foolish youth, who had not long joined the regiment; but as she was quite unconscious that he had been selected for her, Reine was happily free from all sense of being badly treated. He laughed at the jokes which Kate and Sophy made, and held his tongue otherwise—thus fulfilling all the duty for which he was told off. After this morning meal, which was so much gayer and more lively than anything at Whiteladies, the newcomers were carried off to see the house and the grounds, upon which many improvements had been made. Sophy was Herbert's guide, and ran before him through all the new rooms, showing the new library, the morning-room, and the other additions. "This is one good of an ugly modern place," she said. "You can never alter dear old Whiteladies, Bertie. If you did, we should get up a crusade of all the Austins and all the antiquarians, and do something to you—kill you, I think;

unless some weak-minded person like myself were to interfere."

"I shall never put myself in danger," he said, "though perhaps I am not such a fanatic about Whiteladies as you others."

"Don't!" said Sophy, raising her hand as if to stop his mouth. "If you say a word more I shall hate you. It is small, to be sure; and if you should have a very large family when you marry—" she went on, with a laugh—"but the Austins never have large families; that is one part of the curse, I suppose your Aunt Augustine would say; but I hate large families, and I think it is very grand to have a curse belonging to us. It is as good as a family ghost. What a pity that the monk and the nun don't walk! But there *is* something in the great staircase. Did you ever see it? I never lived in Whiteladies, or I should have tried to see what it was."

"Did you never live at Whiteladies? I thought when we were children——"

"Never for more than a day. The old ladies hate us. Ask us now, Bertie, there's a darling. Well! he will be a darling if he asks us. It is the most delightful old house in the world, and I want to go."

"Then I ask you on the spot," said Herbert. "Am

I a darling now? You know," he added, in a lower tone, as they went on, and separated from the others, "it was as near as possible being yours. Two years ago no one supposed I should get better. You must have felt it was your own?"

"Not once," said Sophy. "Papa's, perhaps—but what would that have done for us? Daughters marry and go away—it never would have been ours; and Mrs. Farrel-Austin won't have a son. Isn't it provoking? Oh, she is only our step-mother, you know—it does not matter what we say. Papa could beat her; but I am so glad, so glad," cried Sophy, with a glow of smiles, "that instead of papa, or that nasty little French boy, Bertie, it is you, our cousin, whom we are fond of!— I can't tell you how glad I am."

"Thanks," said Herbert, clasping the hand she held out to him, and holding it. It seemed so natural to him that she should be glad.

"Because," said Sophy, looking at him with her pretty blue eyes, "we have been sadly neglected, Kate and I. We have never had any one to advise us, or tell us what we ought to do. We both came out too young, and were thrown on the world to do what we pleased. If you see anything in us you don't like, Bertie, remember this is

the reason. We never had a brother. Now, you will be as near a brother to us as any one could be. We shall be able to go and consult you, and you will help us out of our scrapes. I did so hope, before you came, that we should be friends; and now I *think* we shall," she said, giving a little pressure to the hand which still held hers.

Herbert was so much affected by this appeal that it brought the tears to his eyes.

"I think we shall indeed," he said warmly,—"nay, we are. It would be a strange fellow indeed who would not be glad to be brother, or anything else, to a girl like you."

"Brother, *not* anything else," said Sophy, audibly but softly. "Ah, Bertie! you can't think how glad I am. As soon as we saw you, Kate and I could not help feeling what an advantage Reine had over us. To have you to refer to always—to have you to talk to—instead of the nonsense that we girls are always chattering to each other."

"Well," said Herbert, more and more pleased, "I suppose it is an advantage; not that I feel myself particularly wise, I am sure. There is always something occurring which shows one how little one knows."

"If *you* feel that, imagine how *we* must feel," said Sophy, "who have never had any education. Oh yes, we have had just the same as other girls! but not like men—not like you, Bertie. Oh, you need not be modest. I know you haven't been at the University to waste your time and get into debt, like so many we know. But you have done a great deal better. You have read and you have thought, and Reine has had all the advantage. I almost hate Reine for being so much better off than we are."

"But really," cried Herbert, laughing, half with pleasure, half with a sense of the incongruity of the praise, "you give me a great deal more credit than I deserve. I have never been very much of a student. I don't know that I have done much for Reine—except what one can do in the way of conversation, you know," he added, after a pause, feeling that after all it must have been this improving conversation which had made his sister what she was. It had not occurred to him before, but the moment it was suggested—yes, of course, that was what it must be.

"Just what I said," cried Sophy; "and we never had that advantage. So if you find us frivolous, Bertie——"

"How could I find you frivolous? You are nothing

of the sort. I shall almost think you want me to pay you compliments—to say what I think of you."

"I hate compliments," cried Sophy. "Here we are on the lawn, Bertie, and here are the others. What do you think of it? We have had such trouble with the grass—now, I think it is rather nice. It has been rolled and watered and mown, and rolled and watered and mown again, almost every day."

"It is the best croquet-ground in the county," said the Major; "and why shouldn't we have a game? It is pleasant to be out of doors such a lovely day."

This was assented to, and the others went in-doors for their hats; but Sophy stayed. "I have got rid of any complexion I ever had," she said. "I am always out of doors. The sun must have got tired of burning me, I am so brown already," and she put up two white, pink-fingered hands to her white and pink cheeks. She was one of those blondes of satin-skin who are not easily affected by the elements. Herbert laughed, and with the privilege of cousinship took hold of one of the pink tips of finger, and looked at the hand.

"Is that what you call brown?" he said. "We have just come from the land of brown beauties, and I ought to know. It is the colour of milk, with roses in it," and

the young man, who was not used to paying compliments, blushed as he made his essay; which was more than Sophy, experienced in the commodity, felt any occasion to do.

"Milk of roses," she said, laughing; "that is a thing for the complexion. I don't use it, Bertie. I don't use anything of the kind. Men are always so dreadfully knowing about girls' dodges—" The word slipped out against her will, for Sophy felt that slang was not expedient, and she blushed at this slip, though she had not blushed at the compliment. Herbert did not, however, discriminate. He took the pretty suffusion to his own account, and laughed at the inadvertent word. He thought she put it in inverted commas, as a lady should; and when this is done, a word of slang is piquant now and then as a quotation. Besides, he was far from being a purist in language. Kate, however, the unselfish, thoughtful elder sister, sweetly considerate of the young beauty, brought out Sophy's hat with her own; and they began their game. Herbert and Reine were novices, unacquainted (strange as the confession must sound) with this universally popular amusement; and Sophy boldly stepped into the breach, and took them both on her side. "I am the best player of the lot," said Sophy calmly.

"You know I am. So Bertie and Reine shall come with me; and beat us if you can!" said the young champion; and if the reader will believe me, Sophy's boast came true. Kate, indeed, made a brave stand; but the Major was middle-aged, and the young fellow was feeble, and Herbert showed an unsuspected genius for the game. He was quite pleased himself by his success; everything, indeed, seemed to conspire to make Herbert feel how clever he was, how superior he was, what an acquisition was his society; and during the former part of his life it had not been so. Like one of the great philosophers of modern times, Herbert felt that those who appreciated him so deeply must in themselves approach the sublime. Indeed, I fear it is a little mean on my part to take the example of that great philosopher, as if he were a rare instance; for is not the foolishest of us of the same opinion? "Call me wise, and I will allow you to be a judge," says an old Scotch proverb. Herbert was ready to think all these kind people very good judges who so magnified and glorified himself.

In the evening there was a very small dinner-party; again two men to balance Kate and Reine, but not the same men—persons of greater weight and standing, with Farrel-Austin himself at the foot of his own table. Mrs.

Farrel-Austin was not well enough to come to dinner, but appeared in the drawing-room afterwards; and when the gentlemen came up-stairs, she appropriated Reine. Sophy, who had a pretty little voice, had gone to the piano, and was singing to Herbert, pausing at the end of every verse to ask him, "Was it very bad? Tell me what you dislike most, my high notes or my low notes, or my execution, or what?" while Herbert, laughing and protesting, gave vehement praise to all. "I don't dislike anything. I am delighted with every word; but you must not trust to me, for indeed I am no judge of music." "No judge of music, and yet fresh from Italy!" cried Sophy, with flattering contempt.

While this was going on Mrs. Farrel-Austin drew Reine close to her sofa. "I am very glad to see you, my dear," she said, "and so far as I am concerned I hope you will come often. You are so quiet and nice; and all I have seen of your Aunt Susan I like, though I know she does not like us. But I hope, my dear, you won't get into the racketing set our girls are so fond of. I should be very sorry for that; it would be bad for your brother. I don't mean to say anything against Kate and Sophy. They are very lively and very strong, and it suits them, though in some things I think it is

bad for them too. But your brother could never stand it, my dear; I know what bad health is, and I can see that he is not strong still."

"Oh, yes," said Reine eagerly. "He has been going out in the world a great deal lately. I was frightened at first; but I assure you he is quite strong."

Mrs. Farrel-Austin shook her head. "I know what poor health is," she said, "and however strong you may get, you never can stand a racket. I don't suppose for a moment that they mean any harm, but still I should not like anything to happen in this house. People might say —and your Aunt Susan would be sure to think— It is very nice, I suppose, for young people; and of course at your age you are capable of a great deal of racketing; but I must warn you, my dear, it's ruin for the health."

"Indeed, I don't think we have any intention of racketing."

"Ah, it is not the intention that matters," said the invalid. "I only want to warn you, my dear. It is a very racketing set. You should not let yourself be drawn into it, and quietly, you know, when you have an opportunity, you might say a word to your brother. I dare say he feels the paramount value of health. Oh what should I give now if I had only been warned

when I was young! You cannot play with your health, my dear, with impunity. Even the girls, though they are so strong, have headaches and things which they oughtn't to have at their age. But I hope you will come here often, you are so nice and quiet—not like the most of those that come here."

"What is Mrs. Austin saying to you, Reine?" asked Kate.

"She told me I was nice and quiet," said Reine, thinking that in honour she was bound not to divulge the rest; and they both laughed at the moderate compliment.

"So you are," said Kate, giving her a little hug. "It is refreshing to be with any one so tranquil—and I am sure you will do us both good."

Reine was not impressed by this as Herbert was by Sophy's pretty speeches. Perhaps the praise that was given to her was not equally well chosen. The passionate little semi-French girl (who had been so ultra-English in Normandy) was scarcely flattered by being called tranquil, and did not feel that to do Sophy and Kate good by being "nice and quiet" was a lofty mission. What did a racketing set mean? she wondered. An involuntary prejudice against the house rose

in her mind, and this opened her eyes to something of Sophy's tactics. It was rather hard to sit and look on and see Herbert thus fooled to the top of his bent. When she went to the piano beside them Sophy grew more rational; but still she kept referring to Herbert, consulting him. "Is it like this they do it in Italy?" She sang, executing a "shake" with more natural sweetness than science. "Indeed, I don't know, but it is beautiful," said Herbert. "Ask Reine." "Oh, Reine is only a girl like myself. She will say what she thinks will please me. I have far more confidence in a gentleman," cried Sophy; "and above all in you, Bertie, who have promised to be a brother to me," she said, in a lower tone. "Did I promise to be a brother?" said poor, foolish Herbert, his heart beating with vanity and pleasure. And the evening passed amid these delights.

CHAPTER XI.

I NEED not follow day by day the course of Herbert's life. Though the brother and sister went out a good deal together at first, being asked to all the great houses in the neighbourhood, as became their position in the county and their recent arrival, yet there gradually arose a separation between Herbert and Reine. It was inevitable, and she had learned to acknowledge this, and did not rebel as at first; but a great many people shook their heads when it became apparent that, notwithstanding Mrs. Farrel-Austin's warning, Herbert had been drawn into the "racketing set" whose head-quarters were at the Hatch. The young man was fond of pleasure as well as of flattery, and it was summer, when all the ills that flesh is heir to, relax their hold a little, and dissipation is comparatively harmless. He went to Ascot with the party from the Hatch, and he went to a great many other places with them; and though the friends he made under their auspices led Herbert into places much

worse both for his health and mind than any the girls could lead him to, he remained faithful, so far, to Kate and Sophy, and continued to attend them wherever they went. As for Reine, she was happy enough in the comparative quiet into which she dropped when the first outbreak of gaiety was over. Miss Susan, against her will, still remained at Whiteladies; against her will—yet it may well be supposed it was no pleasure to her to separate herself from the old house in which she had been born, and from which she had never been absent for so much as six months all her life. Miss Augustine, for her part, took little or no notice of the change in the household. She went her way as usual, morning and evening, to the Almshouses. When Miss Susan spoke to her, as she did sometimes, about the Grange which stood all this time furnished and ready for instant occupation, she only shook her head. "I do not mean to leave Whiteladies," she said calmly. Neither did Giovanna, so far as could be perceived. "You cannot remain here when we go," said Miss Susan to her.

"There is much room in the house," said Giovanna; "and when you go, Madame Suzanne, there will be still more. The little chamber for me and the child, what will that do to any one?"

"But you cannot, you must not; it will be improper —don't you understand?" cried Miss Susan.

Giovanna shook her head.

"I will speak to M. 'Erbert," she said, smiling in Miss Susan's face.

This then was the position of affairs. Herbert put off continually the settlement between them, begging that he might have a little holiday, that she would retain the management of the estate and of his affairs—and this with a certain generosity mingling with his inclination to avoid trouble; for in reality he loved the woman who had been in her way a mother to him, and hesitated about taking from her the occupation of her life. It was well meant; and Miss Susan felt within herself that moral cowardice which so often affects those who live in expectation of an inevitable change or catastrophe. It must come, she knew; and when the moment of departure came, she could not tell, she dared not anticipate what horrors might come with it; but she was almost glad to defer it, to consent that it should be postponed from day to day. The king in the story, however, could scarcely manage, I suppose, to be happy with that sword hanging over his head. No doubt he got used to it, poor wretch, and could eat and drink, and

snatch a fearful joy from the feasting which went on around him; he might even make merry, perhaps, but he could scarcely be very happy under the shadow. So Miss Susan felt. She went on steadily, fulfilled all her duties, dispensed hospitalities, and even now and then permitted herself to be amused; but she was not happy. Sometimes, when she said her prayers—for she did still say her prayers, notwithstanding the burden on her soul —she would breathe a sigh which was scarcely a prayer, that it might soon be over one way or another, that her sufferings might be cut short; but then she would rouse herself up, and recall that despairing sigh. Giovanna would not budge. Miss Susan made a great many appeals to her, when Reine was straying about the garden, or after she had gone to her innocent rest. She offered sums which made that young woman tremble in presence of a temptation which she could scarcely resist; but she set her white teeth firm, and conquered. It was better to have all than only a part, Giovanna thought, and she comforted herself that at the last moment, if her scheme failed, she could fall back upon and accept Miss Susan's offer. This made her very secure through all the events that followed. When Herbert abandoned Whiteladies and was constantly at the Hatch, when he

seemed to have altogether given himself over to his cousins, and a report got up through the county that "an alliance was contemplated," as the Kingsborough paper put it grandly, having a habit of royalty, so to speak—between two distinguished county families, Giovanna bore the *contretemps* quite calmly, feeling that Miss Susan's magnificent offer was always behind her to fall back upon, if her great personal enterprise should come to nothing. Her serenity gave her a great advantage over Herbert's feebler spirit. When he came home to Whiteladies, she regained her sway over him, and as she never indulged in a single look of reproach, such as Sophy employed freely when he left the Hatch, or was too long of returning, she gradually established for herself a superior place in the young man's mind.

As for Herbert himself, the three long months of that summer were more to him than all the former years of his life put together. His first outburst of freedom on the Riviera, and his subsequent ramble in Italy, had been overcast by adverse circumstances. He had got his own way, but at a cost which was painful to him, and a great many annoyances and difficulties had been mingled with his pleasure. But now there was nothing to interfere with it. Reine was quiescent, presenting a

smiling countenance when he saw her, not gloomy or frightened, as she had been at Cannes. She was happy enough ; she was at home, with her aunts to fall back upon, and plenty of friends. And everybody and everything smiled upon Herbert. He was acting generously, he felt, to his former guardian, in leaving to her all the trouble of his affairs. He was surrounded by gay friends and unbounded amusements, amusements bounded only by the time that was occupied by them, and those human limitations which make it impossible to do two things at once. Could he have been in two places at once, enjoying two different kinds of pleasure at the same time, his engagements were sufficient to have secured for him a double enjoyment. From the highest magnates of the county, down to the young soldiers of Kingsborough, his own contemporaries, everybody was willing to do him honour. The entire month of June he spent in town, where he had everything that town could give him—though there life moved rather more quickly than suited his still unconfirmed strength. Both in London and in the country he was invited into higher circles than those which the Farrel-Austins were permitted to enter; but still he remained faithful to his cousins, who gave him a homage which he could not expect elsewhere, and who

had always "something going on," both in town and country, and no pause in their fast and furious gaiety. They were always prepared to go with him or to take him somewhere, to tell him all the antecedents and history of this one and that one, and to make the ignorant youth feel himself an experienced man. Then, when it pleased him to go home, he was the master, welcomed by all, and found another beautiful slave waiting serene to burn incense to him. No wonder Herbert enjoyed himself. He had come out of his chrysalis condition altogether, and was enjoying the butterfly existence to an extent which he had never conceived of, fluttering about everywhere, sunning his fine new wings, his new energies, his manhood, and his health, and his wealth, and all the glories that were his. To do him justice, he would have brought his household up to town, in order that Reine too might have had her glimpse of the season, could he have persuaded them; but Reine, just then at a critical point of her life, declined the indulgence. Kate and Sophy, however, were fond of saying that they had never enjoyed a season so much. Opera-boxes rained upon them; they never wanted bouquets; and their parties to Richmond, to Greenwich, wherever persons of their class go, were end-

less. Herbert was ready for anything, and their father did not decline the advantages, though he disliked the giver of them; and even when he was disagreeable, matrons were always procurable to chaperone the party, and preside over their pleasures. Everybody believed, as Sophy did, that there could be but one conclusion to so close an intimacy.

"At all events, we have had a very jolly season," said Kate, who was not so sure.

And Herbert fully echoed the words when he heard them. Yes, it had been a very jolly season. He had "spent his money free," which in the highest class, as well as in the lowest, is the most appropriate way in which a young man can make himself agreeable. He had enjoyed himself, and he had given to others a great many opportunities of enjoying themselves. Now and then he carried down a great party to Whiteladies, and introduced the *beau monde* to his beautiful old house, and made one of those fêtes champêtres for his friends which break so agreeably upon the toils of London pleasuring, and which supply to the highest class, always somewhat like the lowest in their peculiar delights, an elegant substitute for Cremorne and Rosherville. Miss Susan bestirred herself, and made a magnificent response

to his appeals when he asked her to receive such parties, and consoled herself for the gay mob that disturbed the dignity of the old house, by the noble names of some of them, which she was too English not to be impressed by. And thus in a series of delights the summer passed from May to August. Herbert did not go to Scotland, though he had many invitations and solicitations to do so when the season was over. He came home instead, and settled there when fashion melted away out of town; and Sophy, considering the subject, as she thought, impartially, and without any personal prejudice (she said), concluded that it must be for her sake he stayed.

"I know the Duke of Ptarmigan asked him, and Tom Heath, and Billy Trotter," she said to her sister. "Billy, they say, has the finest moors going. Why shouldn't he have gone, unless he had some motive? He can't have any shooting here till September. If it isn't *that*, what do you suppose it can be?"

"Well, at all events we have had a very jolly season," said Kate, not disposed to commit herself; "and what we have to do is to keep things going, and show him the country, and not be dull even now." Which admirable suggestion they carried out with all their hearts.

Herbert's thoughts, however, were not, I fear, so far advanced as Sophy supposed. It was not that he did not think of that necessity of marrying which Miss Augustine enforced upon him in precisely the same words, every time she saw him. "You are wasting time —you are wasting my time, Herbert," she said to him when he came back to Whiteladies, in July. Frankly she thought this the most important point of view. So far as he was concerned, he was young, and there was time enough; but if she, a woman of seven-and-fifty, was to bring up his heir and initiate him into her ideas, surely there was not a moment to be lost in taking the preliminary steps.

Herbert was very much amused with this view of the subject. It tickled his imagination so, that he had not been able to refrain from communicating it to several of his friends. But various of these gentlemen, after they had laughed, pronounced it to be their opinion that, by Jove, the old girl was not so far out.

"I wouldn't stand having that little brat of a child set up as the heir under my very nose; and, by Jove, Austin, I'd settle that old curmudgeon Farrel's hopes fast enough, if I were in your place," said his advisers.

Herbert was not displeased with the notion. He

played with it, with a certain enjoyment. He felt that he was a prize worth anybody's pursuit, and liked to hear that such and such ladies were "after him." The Duke of Ptarmigan had a daughter or two, and Sir Billy Trotter's sister might do worse, her friends thought. Herbert smoothed an incipient moustache, late in growing, and consequently very precious, and felt a delightful complaisance steal over him. And he knew that Sophy, his cousin, did not despise him; I am not sure even that the young coxcomb was not aware that he might have the pick of either of the girls, if he chose; which also, though Kate had never thought on the subject, was true enough. She had faithfully given him over to her younger sister, and never interfered; but if Herbert had thrown his handkerchief to her, she would have thought it sinful to refuse. When he thought on the subject, which was often enough, he had a kind of lazy sense that this was what would befall him at last. He would throw his handkerchief some time when he was at the Hatch, and wheresoever the chance wind might flutter it, there would be his fate. He did not really care much whether it might happen to be Sophy or Kate.

When he came home, however, these thoughts would

float away out of his mind. He did not think of marrying, though Miss Augustine spoke to him on the subject every day. He thought of something else, which yet was not so far different; he thought that nowhere, in society or out of it, had he seen any one like Giovanna.

"Did you ever see such a picture?" he would say to Reine. "Look at her! Now she's sculpture, with that child on her shoulder. If the boy was only like herself, what a group they'd make! I'd like to have Marochetti, or some of those swells, down, to make them in marble. And she'd paint just as well. By Jove, she's all the arts put together. How she does sing! Patti and the rest are nothing to her. But I don't understand how she could be the mother of that boy."

Giovanna came back across the lawn, having swung the child from her shoulder on to the fragrant grass, in time to hear this, and smiled and said, "He does not resemble me, does he? Madame Suzanne, M. 'Erbert remarks that the boy is not dark as me. He is another type—yes, another type, n'est-ce pas!"

"Not a bit like you," said Herbert. "I don't say anything against Jean, who is a dear little fellow; but he is not like you."

"Ah! but he is the heir of M. 'Erbert, which is

better," cried Giovanna with a laugh, "until M. 'Erbert will marry. Why will not you marry and range yourself? Then the little Jean and the great Giovanna will melt away like the fogs. Ah, marry, M. 'Erbert! it is what you ought to do."

"Are you so anxious, then, to melt away like the fog?—like the sunshine, you mean," said the young man in a low voice. They were all in the porch, but he had gone out to meet her, on pretence of playing with little Jean.

"But no," said Giovanna, smiling, "not at all. I am very well here; but when M. 'Erbert will marry, then I must go away. Little Jean will be no more the heir."

"Then I shall never marry," said the young man, though still in tones so low as not to reach the ears of the others. Giovanna turned her face towards him with a mocking laugh.

"Bah! already I know Madame 'Erbert's name, her little name!" she cried, and picked up the boy with one vigorous easy sweep of her beautiful arms, and carried him off, singing to him—like a goddess, Herbert thought, like the nurse of a young Apollo. He was dreadfully disconcerted with this sudden withdrawal, and when Miss Augustine, coming in, addressed him in her usual

way, he turned from her pettishly, with an impatient exclamation,—

"I wish you would give over," he said; "you are making a joke of a serious matter. You are putting all sorts of follies into people's heads."

It was only at Whiteladies, however, that he entertained this feeling. When he was away from home he would now and then consider the question of throwing the handkerchief, and made up his mind that there would be a kind of justice in it if the *petit nom* of the future Mrs. Herbert turned out to be either Sophy or Kate.

Things went on in this way until, one day in August, it was ordained that the party, with its usual military attendants, should vary its enjoyments by a day on the river. They started from Water Beeches, Everard's house, in the morning, with the intention of rowing up the river as far as Marlow, and returning in the evening to a late dinner. The party consisted of Kate and Sophy, with their father, Reine and Herbert, Everard himself, and a quantity of young soldiers, with the wife of one of them—four ladies, to wit, and an indefinite number of men. They started on a lovely morning, warm yet fresh, with a soft little breeze blowing, stirring the long flags and rushes, and floating the water-lilies

that lurked among their great leaves in every corner. Reine and Everard had not seen much of each other for some time. From the day when he went off in an injured state of mind, reminding her half indignantly that she knew where to find him when he was wanted, they had met only two or three times, and never had spoken to each other alone. Everard had been in town for the greater part of the time, purposely taking himself away, sore and wounded, to have, as he thought, no notice taken of him; while Reine, on her part, was too proud to make any advances to so easily affronted a lover. This had been in her mind, restraining her from many enjoyments when both Herbert and Miss Susan thought her "quite happy." She was "quite happy," she always said; did not wish to go to town, preferred to stay at Whiteladies, had no desire to go to Court and to make her début in society, as Miss Susan felt she should. Reine resisted, being rather proud and fanciful and capricious, as the best of girls may be permitted to be under such circumstances; and she had determinedly made herself "happy" in her country life, with such gaieties and amusements as came to her naturally. I think, however, that she had looked forward to this day on the river, not without a little hope, born of weariness, that

something might happen to break the ice between Everard and herself. By some freak of fortune, however, or unkind arrangement, it so happened that Reine and Everard were not even in the same boat when they started. She thought (naturally) that it was his fault, and he thought (equally naturally) that it was her fault; and each believed that the accident was a premeditated and elaborately schemed device to hold the other off. I leave the reader to guess whether this added to the pleasure of the party, in which these two, out of their different boats, watched each other when they could, and alternated between wild gaiety put on when each was within sight of the other, to show how little either minded—and fits of abstraction. The morning was beautiful; the fair river glided past them, here shining like a silver shield, there falling into heavenly coolness under the shadows, with deep liquid tones of green and brown, with glorified reflections of every branch and twig, with forests of delicious growth (called weeds) underneath its clear rippling, throwing up long blossomed boughs of starry flowers, and in the shallows masses of great cool flags and beds of water-lilies. This was not a scene for the chills and heats of a love-quarrel, or for the perversity of a voluntary separation. And I

think Everard felt this, and grew impatient of the foolish caprice which he thought was Reine's, and which Reine thought was his, as so often happens. When they started in the cooler afternoon, to come down the river, he put her almost roughly into his boat.

"You are coming with me this time," he said in a half savage tone, gripping her elbow fiercely as he caught her on her way to the other, and almost lifted her into his boat.

Reine half-resisted for the moment, her face flaming with respondent wrath; but melted somehow by his face so near her, and his imperative grasp, she allowed herself to be thrust into the little nutshell which she knew so well, and which (or its predecessors) had been called "Queen" for years, thereby acquiring for Everard a character for loyalty which Reine knew he did not deserve, though he had never told her so. The moment she had taken her place there, however, Reine justified all Everard's sulks by immediately resuming towards him the old tone. If she had not thus recovered him as her vizier and right-hand man, she would, I presume, have kept her anxiety in her own breast. As it was, he had scarcely placed her on the cushions, when suddenly, without a pause, without one special word to him, asking

pardon (as she ought) for her naughtiness, Reine said suddenly, "Everard! oh, will you take care, please, that Bertie does not row?"

He looked at her wholly aggravated, but half laughing. "Is this all I am ever to be good for?" he said; "not a word for me, no interest in me. Am I to be Bertie's dry-nurse all my life? And is this all?——"

She put her hand softly on his arm, and drew him to her, to whisper to him. In that moment all Reine's coldness, all her doubts of him had floated away, with a suddenness which I don't pretend to account for, but which belonged to her impulsive character (and in her heart I do not believe she had ever had the least real doubt of him, though it was a kind of dismal amusement to think she had). She put up her face to him, with her hand on his arm. "Speak low," she said. "Is there any one I could ask but you? Everard, he has done too much already to-day; don't let him row."

Everard laughed. He jumped out of his boat and spoke to the other men about, confidentially, in undertones. "Don't let him see you mean it," he said; and when he had settled this piece of diplomacy, he came back and pushed off his own boat into mid-stream. "The others had all got settled," he said. "I don't

see why I should run upon your messages, and do everything you tell me, and never get anything by it. Mrs. Sellinger has gone with Kate and Sophy, who have much more need of a chaperone than you have: and for the first time I have you to myself, Reine."

Reine had the strings of the rudder in her hands, and could have driven him back, I think, had she liked; but she did not. She let herself and the boat float down the pleasanter way. "I don't mind," she said softly; "for a long time I have had no talk with you—since we came home."

"And whose fault is that, I should like to know?" cried Everard, with a few long swift strokes carrying the boat almost out of sight of the larger one, which had not yet started. "How cruel you are, Reine! You say that as if I was to blame; when you know all the time if you had but held up a little finger——"

"Why should I hold up a little finger?" said Reine softly, leaning back in her seat. But there was a smile on her face. It was true, she acknowledged to herself. She had known it all the time. A little finger, a look, a word would have done it, though she had made believe to be lonely and dreary, and half-forsaken, and angry even. At which, as the boat glided down the river in

the soft shadows after sunset, in the cool greyness of the evening, she smiled again.

But before they reached the Water Beeches, these cool soft shades had given way to a sudden cold mist, what country people call a "blight." It was only then, I think, that these two recollected themselves. They had sped down the shining stream, with a little triumph in outstripping the other and larger boat, though it had four rowers, and Everard was but one. They had gone through the locks by themselves, leaving saucy messages for their companions, and it was only when they got safely within sight of Everard's house, and felt the coldness of the "blight" stealing through them, that they recollected to wonder what had kept the others so long. Then Reine grew frightened, unreasonably, as she felt; fantastically, for was not Herbert quite well? but yet beyond her own power of control.

"Turn back, and let us meet them," she begged; and Everard, though unwilling, could not refuse to do it. They went back through the growing darkness, looking out eagerly for the party.

"That cannot be them," said Everard, as the long sweep of oars became audible. "It must be a racing boat, for I hear no voices."

They lay close by the bank and watched, Reine in an agony of anxiety, for which she could give no reason. But sure enough it was the rest of the party, rowing quickly down, very still and frightened. Herbert had insisted upon rowing, in spite of all remonstrances, and just a few minutes before had been found half-fainting over his oar, shivering and breathless.

"It is nothing—it is nothing," he gasped when he saw Reine, "and we are close at home." But his heart panted so, that this was all he could say.

CHAPTER XII.

WHAT a dismal conclusion it was of so merry a day! Herbert walked into the house, indeed, leaning upon Everard's arm, and when some wine had been administered to him, declared himself better, and endeavoured to prove that he was quite able to join them at supper, and that it was nothing. But his pale face and panting breast belied his words, and after a while he acknowledged that perhaps it would be best to remain on the sofa in the drawing-room, while the others had their meal. Reine took her place by him at once, though indeed Sophy, who was kind enough, was ready and even anxious to do it. But in such a case the bond of kin is always paramount. The doctor was sent for at once, and Everard went and came from his guests at the dinner-table, to his much more thought-of guests in the cool, silent drawing-room, where Reine sat on a low chair by the sofa, holding her brother's hand, and fanning him to give him air.

"All right, old fellow!" poor Bertie said, whenever

Everard's anxious face appeared; but when Reine and he were left alone, he panted forth abuse of himself and complaints of Providence. "Just as I thought I was all right—whenever I felt a little freedom, took a little liberty——"

"Oh Bertie," said Reine, "you know you should not have done it. Dear, don't talk now to make it worse. Lie still, and you'll be better. Oh Bertie! have patience, have patience, dear!"

"To look like a fool!" he gasped; "never good for anything. No—more—strength than a baby! and all those fellows looking on."

"Bertie, they are all very kind, they are all very sorry. Oh, how can you talk of looking like a fool?"

"I do," he said; "and the girls too!—weaker, weaker than any of them. Sorry! I don't want them to be sorry; and old Farrel gloating over it. Oh God! I can't bear it—I can't bear it, Reine."

"Bertie, be still—do you hear me? This is weak, if you please; this is unlike a man. You have done too much, and overtired yourself. Is this a reason to give up heart, to abuse everybody, to blaspheme——"

"It is more—than being overtired," he moaned; "feel my heart, how it goes!"

"Yes, it is a spasm," said Reine, taking upon her a composure and confidence she did not feel. "You have had the same before. If you want to be better, don't talk, oh, don't talk, Bertie! Be still, be quite still!"

And thus she sat, with his hand in hers, softly fanning him; and half in exhaustion, half soothed by her words, he kept silent. Reine had harder work when the dinner was over, and Sophy and Kate fluttered into the room, to stand by the sofa, and worry him with questions.

"How are you now? Is your breathing easier? Are you better, Bertie? oh, say you are a little better! We can never, never forgive ourselves for keeping you out so late, and for letting you tire yourself so."

"Please don't make him talk," cried Reine. "He is a little better. Oh, Bertie, Bertie, dear, be still. If he is quite quiet, it will pass off all the sooner. I am not the least frightened," she said, though her heart beat loud in her throat, belying her words; but Reine had seen Farrel-Austin's face, hungry and eager, over his daughters' shoulders. "He is not really so bad; he has had it before. Only *he must*, he must, be still. Oh, Sophy, for the love of heaven, do not make him talk!"

"Nonsense—I am all right," he said.

"Of course he can talk," cried Sophy triumphantly; "you are making a great deal too much fuss, Reine. Make him eat something, that will do him good. There's some grouse. Everard, fetch him some grouse—one can eat that when one can eat nothing else—and I'll run and get him a glass of champagne."

"Oh, go away—oh, keep her away!" cried Reine, joining her hands in eager supplication.

Everard, to whom she looked, shrugged his shoulders, for it was not so easy a thing to do. But by dint of patience the room was cleared at last; and though Sophy would fain have returned by the open window, "just to say good-bye," as she said, "and to cheer Bertie up, for they were all making too great a fuss about him," the whole party were finally got into their carriages, and sent away. Sophy's last words, however, though they disgusted the watchers, were balm to Herbert.

"She is a jolly girl," he said; "you *are* making—too—much fuss. It's—going off. I'll be—all right—directly."

And then in the grateful quiet that followed, which no one disturbed, with his two familiar nurses, who had watched him so often, by his side, the excitement really began to lessen, the palpitation to subside. Reine and

Everard sat side by side, in the silence, saying nothing to each other, almost forgetting, if that were possible, what they had been saying to each other as they glided, in absolute seclusion from all other creatures, down the soft twilight river. All the recent past seemed to melt into the clouds for them, and they were again at Appenzell, at Kandersteg, returned to their familiar occupation, nursing their sick together, as they had so often nursed him before.

Everard had dispatched a messenger to Whiteladies, when he sent for the doctor; and Miss Susan, careful of Reine as well as of Herbert, obeyed the summons along with the anxious François, who understood the case in a moment. The doctor, on his arrival, gave also a certain consolation to the watchers. With quiet all might be well again; there was nothing immediately alarming in the attack; but he must not exert himself, and must be content for the moment at least to retire to the seclusion of an invalid. They all remained in Water Beeches for the night, but next morning were able to remove the patient to Whiteladies. In the morning, before they left, however, poor Everard, once more thrown into a secondary place, took possession of Reine, and led her all over his small premises. It was

a misty morning, touched with the first sensation of autumn, though summer was still all ablaze in the gardens and fields. A perfect tranquillity of repose was everywhere, and as the sun got power, and the soft white mists broke up, a soft clearness of subdued light, as dazzling almost as full sunshine, suffused the warm still atmosphere. The river glided languid under the heat, gleaming white and dark, without the magical colours of the previous day. The lazy shadows drooped over it from the leafy banks, so still that it was hard to say which was substance and which shadow.

"We are going to finish our last night's talk," said Everard.

"Finish!" said Reine half-smiling, half-weeping, for how much had happened since that enchanted twilight! "what more is there to say?" And I don't think there was much more to say—though he kept her under the trees on the riverside, and in the shady little wood by the pond where the skating had been when he received her letter—saying it; so long, that Miss Susan herself came out to look for them, wondering. As she called "Reine! Reine!" through the still air, wondering more and more, she suddenly came in sight of them turning the corner of a great clump of roses, gay in their second

season of bloom. They came towards her arm-in-arm, with a light on their faces which it needed no sorcerer to interpret. Miss Susan had never gone through these experiences herself, but she understood at once what this meant, and her heart gave one leap of great and deep delight. It was so long since she had felt what it was to be happy, that the sensation overpowered her. It was what she had hoped for and prayed for, so long as her hopes were worth much, or her prayers. She had lost sight of this secret longing in the dull chaos of preoccupation which had swallowed her up for so long; and now this thing for which she had never dared to scheme, and which lately she had not had the courage even to wish for, was accomplished before her eyes.

"Oh," said Miss Susan, out of the depths of an experience unknown to them, "how much better God is to us than we are to ourselves! A just desire comes to pass without any scheming." And she kissed them both with lips that trembled, and joy incredible, incomprehensible in her heart. She had ceased to hope for anything that was personally desirable to her; and, lo! here was her chief wish accomplished.

This was all Hebrew and Sanskrit to the young people, who smiled to each other in their ignorance,

but were touched by her emotion, and surrounded her with their happiness and their love, a very atmosphere of tenderness and jubilation. And the sun burst forth just then, and woke up all the dormant glow of colour, as if to celebrate the news now first breathed to other ears than their own; and the birds, they thought, fell a-singing all at once, in full chorus. Herbert, who lay on the sofa, languid and pale, waiting for them to start on his drive home, did not observe these phenomena, poor boy, though the windows were open. He thought they were long of coming (as indeed they were), and was fretful, feeling himself neglected, and eager to get home.

Whiteladies immediately turned itself into an enchanted palace, a castle of silence and quiet. The young master of the house was as if he had been transported suddenly into the Arabian Nights. Everything was arranged for his comfort, for his amusement, to make him forget the noisier pleasures into which he had plunged with so much delight. When he had got over his sombre and painful disappointment, I don't think poor Herbert, accustomed to an invalid existence, disliked the Sybarite seclusion in which he found himself. He had the most careful and tender nurse, watching

every look; and he had (which I suspect was the best of it) a Slave—an Odalisque, a creature devoted to his pleasure—his flatterer, the chief source of his amusement, his dancing-girl, his singing-woman, a whole band of entertainers in one. This I need not say was Giovanna. At last her turn had come, and she was ready to take advantage of it. She did not interfere with the nursing, having perhaps few faculties that way, or perhaps (which is more likely) feeling it wiser not to invade the province of the old servants and the anxious relatives. But she took upon her to amuse Herbert, with a success which none of the others could rival. She was never anxious; she did not look at him with those longing eager eyes which, even in the depths of their love, convey alarm to the mind of the sick. She was gay and bright, and took the best view of everything, feeling quite confident that all would be well; for, indeed, though she liked him well enough, there was no love in her to make her afraid. She was perfectly patient, sitting by him for hours, always ready to take any one's place, ready to sing to him, to read to him in her indifferent English, making him gay with her mistakes, and joining in the laugh against herself with unbroken good-humour. She taught little Jean tricks to amuse the invalid, and made up a

whole series of gymnastic evolutions with the boy, tossing him about in her beautiful arms, a picture of elastic strength and grace. She was, in short—there is no other word for it—not Herbert's nurse or companion, but his slave; and there could be little doubt that it was the presence and ministrations of this beautiful creature which made him so patient of his confinement. And he was quite patient, as contented as in the days when he had no thought beyond his sick room, notwithstanding that now he spoke continually of what he meant to do when he was well. Giovanna cured him of anxiety, made everything look bright to him. It was some time before Miss Susan or Reine suspected the cause of this contented state, which was so good for him, and promoted his recovery so much. A man's nearest friends are slow to recognise or believe that a stranger has more power over him than themselves; but after a while they did perceive it with varying and not agreeable sentiments. I cannot venture to describe the thrill of horror and pain with which Miss Susan found it out. It was while she was walking alone from the village, at the corner of Priory Lane, that the thought struck her suddenly; and she never forgot the aspect of the place, the little heaps of fallen leaves at her feet,

as she stood still in her dismay, and, like a revelation, saw what was coming. Miss Susan uttered a groan so bitter, that it seemed to echo through the air, and shake the leaves from the trees, which came down about her in a shower, for it was now September. "He will marry her!" she said to herself; and the consequences of her own sin, instead of coming to an end, would be prolonged for ever, and affect unborn generations. Reine naturally had no such horror in her mind; but the idea of Giovanna's ascendancy over Herbert was far from agreeable to her, as may be supposed. She struggled hard to dismiss the idea, and she tried what she could to keep her place by her brother, and so resist the growing influence. But it was too late for this; and indeed, I am afraid, involved a sacrifice not only of herself, but of her pride, and of Herbert's affection, that was too much for Reine. To see his looks cloud over, to see him turn his back on her, to hear his querulous questions, "Why did not she go out? Was not Everard waiting? Could not she leave him a little freedom, a little time to himself?"—all this overcame his sister.

"He will marry Giovanna," she said, pouring her woes into the ear of her betrothed. "She must want

to marry him, or she would not be there always, she would not behave as she is doing."

"He will marry whom he likes, darling, and we can't stop him," said Everard, which was poor consolation. And thus the crisis slowly drew near.

In the meantime another event utterly unexpected had followed that unlucky day on the river, and had contributed to leave the little romance of Herbert and Giovanna undisturbed. Mr. Farrel-Austin caught cold in the "blight" that fell upon the river, or in the drive home afterwards; nobody could exactly tell how it was. He caught cold, which brought on congestion of the lungs, and in ten days, taking the county and all his friends utterly by surprise, and himself no less, to whom such a thing seemed incredible—was dead. Dead; not ill, nor in danger, but actually dead—a thing which the whole district gasped to hear, not finding it possible to connect the idea of Farrel-Austin with anything so solemn. The girls drove over twice to ask for Herbert, and had been admitted to the morning-room, the cheerfullest room in the house, where he lay on his sofa, to see him, and had told him lightly (which was a consolation to Herbert, as showing him that he was not alone in misfortune) that papa was ill too, in bed and very

bad. But Sophy and Kate were, like all the rest of the world, totally unprepared for the catastrophe which followed; and they did not come back, being suddenly plunged into all the solemn horror of an event so deeply affecting their own fortunes, as well as such affections as they possessed. Thus, there was not even the diversion of a rival to interrupt Giovanna's opportunity. Farrel-Austin's death affected Miss Susan in the most extraordinary way, so that all her friends were thunderstruck. She was overwhelmed; was it by grief for her enemy? When she received the news, she gave utterance to a wild and terrible cry, and rushed up to her own room, whence she scarcely appeared all the rest of the day. Next morning she presented to her astonished family a countenance haggard and pale, as if by years of suffering. What was the cause? Was it Susan that had loved him, and not Augustine (who took the information very calmly), or what was the secret of this impassioned emotion? No one could say. Miss Susan was like a woman distraught for some days. She would break out into moanings and weeping when she was alone, in which indulgence she was more than once surprised by the bewildered Reine. This was too extraordinary to be accounted for. Was it possible, the others asked them-

selves, that her enmity to Farrel-Austin had been but a perverse cloak for another sentiment? I give these wild guesses, because they were at their wits' end, and had not the least clue to the mystery. So bewildered were they, that they could show her little sympathy, and do nothing to comfort her; for it was monstrous to see her thus afflicted. Giovanna was the only one who seemed to have any insight at this moment into the mind of Miss Susan. I think even she had but a dim realisation of how it was. But she was kind, and did her best to show her kindness; a sympathy which Miss Susan revolted the rest by utter rejection of, a rejection almost fierce in its rudeness.

"Keep me free from that woman—keep her away from me!" she cried wildly.

"Aunt Susan," said Reine, not without reproach in her tone, "Giovanna wants to be kind."

"Oh, kind! What has come to us that I must put up with *her* kindness?" she cried, with her blue eyes aflame.

Neither Reine nor any of the others knew what to say to this strange new phase in Miss Susan's mysterious conduct. For it was apparent to all of them that some mystery had come into her life, into her character, since the innocent old days when her eyes were as clear and

her brow, though so old, as unruffled as their own. Day by day Miss Susan's burden was getting heavier to bear. Farrel's death, which removed all barriers except the one she had herself put there, between Everard and the inheritance of Whiteladies; and this growing fascination of Herbert for Giovanna, which she seemed incapable of doing anything to stop, and which, she cried out to herself in the silence of the night, she never, never would permit herself to consent to, and could not bear;—these two things together filled up the measure of her miseries. Day by day the skies grew blacker over her, her footsteps were hemmed in more terribly; until at last she seemed scarcely to know what she was doing. The bailiff addressed himself to Everard in a kind of despair.

"I can't get no orders," he said. "I can't get nothing reasonable out of Miss Austin; whether it's anxiousness, or what, none of us can tell." And he gave Everard an inquisitive look, as if testing him how far he might go. It was the opinion of the common people that Augustine had been mad for years; and now they thought Miss Susan was showing signs of the same malady. "That's how things goes when it's in a family," the village said.

Thus the utmost miserable endurance, and the most foolish imbecile happiness lived together under the same

roof, vaguely conscious of each other, yet neither fathoming the other's depths. Herbert, like Reine and Everard, perceived that something was wrong with Miss Susan; but being deeply occupied with his own affairs, and feeling the absolute unimportance of anything that could happen to his old aunt in comparison—was not much tempted to dwell upon the idea, or to make any great effort to penetrate the mystery; while she, still more deeply preoccupied with her wretchedness, fearing the future, yet fearing still more to betray herself, did not realise how quickly affairs were progressing, nor how far they had gone. It was not till late in September that she at last awoke to the fact. Herbert was better, almost well again, the doctor pronounced, but sadly shaken and weak. It was a damp rainy day, with chills in it of the waning season, dreary showers of yellow leaves falling with every gust, and all the signs that an early ungenial autumn, without those gorgeous gildings of decay which beguile us of our natural regrets, was closing in, yellow and humid, with wet mists and dreary rain. Everything dismal that can happen is more dismal on such a day, and any diversion which can be had indoors to cheat the lingering hours is a double blessing. Herbert was as usual in the morning-room, which had

been given up to him as the most cheerful place in the house. Reine had been called away to see Everard, who, now that the invalid was better, insisted upon a share of her attention; and she had left the room all the more reluctantly that there was a gleam of pleasure in her brother's eye as she was summoned. "Giovanna will stay with me," he said, the colour rising in his pale cheeks; and Reine fled to Everard, red with mortification and sorrow and anger, to ask him for the hundredth time, "Could nothing be done to stop it—could nothing be done?"

Miss Susan was going about the house from room to room, feverishly active in some things by way of making up, perhaps, for the half-conscious failing of her powers in others. She was restless, and could not keep still to look out upon the flying leaves, the dreary blasts, the grey dismal sky; and the rain prevented her from keeping her miserable soul still by exercise out of doors, as she often did now, contrary to all use and wont. She had no intention in her mind when her restless feet turned the way of Herbert's room. She did not know that Giovanna was there, and Reine absent. She was not suspicious more than usual, neither had she the hope or fear of finding out anything. She went mechanically

that way, as she might have gone through the long turnings of the passage to the porch, where Reine and Everard were looking out upon the dismal autumn day.

When she opened the door, however, listlessly, she saw a sight which woke her up like a trumpet. Giovanna was sitting upon a stool close by Herbert's sofa. One of her hands he was holding in his; with the other she was smoothing back his hair from his forehead, caressing him with soft touches and soft words, while he gazed at her with that melting glow of sentimentality—vanity or love, or both together, in his eyes—which no spectator can ever mistake. As Miss Susan went into the room, Giovanna, who sat with her back to the door, bent over him and kissed him on the forehead, murmuring as she did so into his bewitched and delighted ear.

The looker-on was petrified for the first moment; then she threw up her hands, and startled the lovers with a wild shrill cry. I think it was heard all over the house. Giovanna jumped up from her stool, and Herbert started upright on his sofa; and Reine and Everard, alarmed, came rushing from the porch. They all gazed at Miss Susan, who stood there as pale as marble, gasping with an attempt to speak. Herbert for the moment was cowed and frightened by the sight of her; but Giovanna

had perfect possession of her faculties. She faced the new-comers with a blush which only improved her beauty, and laughed.

"Eh bien!" she cried; "you have then found out, Madame Suzanne? I am content, me. I am not fond of to deceive. Speak to her, mon 'Erbert, the word is to thee."

"Yes, Aunt Susan," he said, trying to laugh too, but blushing a hot uneasy blush, not like Giovanna's. "I beg your pardon. Of course I ought to have spoken to you before; and equally of course now you see what has happened without requiring any explanation. Giovanna, whom you have been so kind to, is going to be my wife."

Miss Susan once more cried out wildly in her misery. "It cannot be—it shall not be! I will not have it!" she said.

And once more Giovanna laughed, not offensively, but with a good-natured sense of fun. "Mon Dieu!" she said, "what can you do? Why should not we be good friends? You cannot do anything, Madame Suzanne. It is all fixed and settled; and if you will think, it is for the best, it will arrange all." Giovanna had a real desire to make peace, to secure *de l'amitié*, as

she said. She went across the room towards Miss Susan, holding out her hand.

And then for a moment a mortal struggle went on in Susan Austin's soul. She repulsed wildly, but mechanically, the offered hand, and stood there motionless, her breast panting, all the powers of nature startled into intensity, and such a conflict and passion going on within her as made her blind and deaf to the world outside. Then suddenly she put her hand upon the nearest chair, and drawing it to her, sat down, opposite to Herbert, with a nervous shiver running over her frame. She put up her hand to her throat, as if to tear away something which restrained or suffocated her; and then she said, in a terrible, stifled voice, "Herbert! first you must hear what I have got to say."

CHAPTER XIII.

GIOVANNA looked at Miss Susan with surprise, then with a little apprehension. It was her turn to be uneasy. "Que voulez-vous? que voulez-vous dire?" she said under her breath, endeavouring to catch Miss Susan's eye. Miss Susan was a great deal too impassioned and absorbed even to notice the disturbed condition of her adversary. She knew herself to be surrounded by an eager audience, but yet in her soul she was alone, insensible to everything, moved only by a passionate impulse to relieve herself, to throw off the burden which was driving her mad. She did not even see Giovanna, who after walking round behind Herbert, trying to communicate by the eyes with the woman whom all this time she had herself subdued by covert threats, sat down at last at the head of the sofa, putting her hand, which Herbert took into his, upon it. Probably this sign of kindness stimulated Miss Susan, though I doubt whether

she was conscious of it, something having laid hold upon her which was beyond her power to resist.

"I have a story to tell you, children," she said, pulling instinctively with her hand at the throat of her dress, which seemed to choke her, "and a confession to make. I have been good, good enough in my way, trying to do my duty most of my life; but now at the end of it I have done wrong, great wrong, and sinned against you all. God forgive me! and I hope you'll forgive me. I've been trying to save myself from the—exposure—from the shame, God help me! I have thought of myself, when I ought to have thought of you all. Oh, I've been punished! I've been punished! But perhaps it is not yet too late. Oh, Herbert, Herbert! my dear boy, listen to me!"

"If you are going to say anything against Giovanna, you will lose your time, Aunt Susan," said Herbert; and Giovanna leaned forward on the arm of the sofa and kissed his forehead again in thanks and triumph.

"What I am going to say first is against myself," said Miss Susan. "It is three years ago—a little more than three years; Farrel-Austin, who is dead, came and told me that he had found the missing people, the Austins whom you have heard of, whom I had sought for so

long, and that he had made some bargain with them, that they should withdraw in his favour. You were very ill then, Herbert, thought to be dying; and Farrel-Austin—poor man, he is dead!—was our enemy. It was dreadful, dreadful to think of him coming here, being the master of the place. That was my sin to begin with. I thought I could bear anything sooner than that."

Augustine came into the room at this moment. She came and went so noiselessly that no one even heard her; and Miss Susan was too much absorbed to note anything. The new-comer stood still near the door behind her sister, at first because it was her habit, and then, I suppose, in sympathy with the motionless attention of the others, and the continuance without a pause of Miss Susan's voice.

"I meant no harm; I don't know what I meant. I went to them to break the bargain, to show them the picture of the house, to make them keep their rights against that man. Farrel-Austin's gone, and God knows what was between him and us; but to think of him here made me mad, and I went to try and break the bargain. I own that was what I meant. It was not, perhaps, Christian-like; not what your Aunt Augustine, who is as

good as an angel, would have approved of; but it was not wicked, not wicked, if I had done no more than that!

"When I got there," said Miss Susan, drawing a long breath, "I found them willing enough; but the man was old, and his son was dead, and nothing but daughters left. In the room with them was a daughter-in-law, a young married woman, a young widow——"

"Yes, there was me," said Giovanna. "To what good is all this narrative, Madame Suzanne? Me, I know it before, and Monsieur 'Erbert is not amused; look, he yawns. We have assez, assez, for to-day."

"There was *her;* sitting in the room, a poor, melancholy, neglected creature; and there was the other young woman, Gertrude, pretty and fair, like an English girl. She was—going to have a baby," said Miss Susan, even at that moment hesitating in her old maidenliness before she said it, her old face colouring softly. "The devil put it into my head all at once. It was not premeditated; I did not make it up in my mind. All at once, all at once the devil put it into my head! I said suddenly to the old woman, to old Madame Austin, 'Your daughter-in-law is in the same condition?' She was sitting down crouched in a corner. She was said to be sick. What

was more natural," cried poor Miss Susan looking round, "than to think *that* was the cause?"

Perhaps it was the first time she had thought of this excuse. She caught at the idea with heat and eagerness, appealing to them all. "What more natural than that I should think so? She never rose up; I could not see her. Oh, children," cried Miss Susan, wringing her hands, "I cannot tell how much or how little wickedness there was in my first thought; but answer me, wasn't it natural? The old woman took me up in a moment, took up more—yes, I am sure—more than I meant. She led me away to her room, and there we talked of it. She did not say to me distinctly that the widow was not in that way. We settled," she said after a pause, with a shiver and gasp before the words, "that anyhow—if a boy came—it was to be Giovanna's boy and the heir."

Herbert made an effort at this moment to relinquish Giovanna's hand, which he had been holding all the time; not, I believe, because of this information which he scarcely understood as yet, but because his arm was cramped remaining so long in the same position; but she, as was natural, understood the movement otherwise. She held him for a second, then tossed his hand away

and sprang up from her chair. "Après?" she cried, with an insolent laugh. "Madame Suzanne, you talk follies, you are too old. This goes without saying that the boy is Giovanna's boy."

"Yes, we know all this," said Herbert pettishly. "Aunt Susan, I cannot imagine what you are making all this fuss and looking so excited about. What do you mean? What is all this about old women and babies? I wish you would speak out if you have anything to say. Giovanna, come here."

"Yes," she said, throwing herself on the sofa beside him; "yes, mon 'Erbert, mon bien-aimé. You will not abandon me, whatever any one may say?"

"Herbert," cried Miss Susan, "let her alone, let her alone, for God's sake! She is guilty, guiltier than I am. She made a pretence as her mother-in-law told her, pretended to be ill, pretended to have a child, kept up the deceit—how can I tell how long?—till now. Gertrude is innocent, whose baby was taken; she thought it died, poor thing, poor thing! but Giovanna is not innocent. All she has done, all she has said, has been lies, lies! The child is not her child; it is not the heir. She has thrust herself into this house, and done all this mischief, by a lie. She knows it; look at her. She has kept her

place by threatening me, by holding my disgrace before my eyes; and now Herbert, my poor boy, my poor boy, she will ruin you. Oh, put her away, put her away!"

Herbert rose up, trembling in his weakness. "Is this true, Giovanna?" he said, turning to her piteously. "Have you anything to say against it? Is it true?"

Reine, who had been standing behind, listening with an amazement beyond the reach of words, came to her brother's side, to support him at this terrible moment; but he put her away. Even Miss Susan, who was the chief sufferer, fell into the background. Giovanna kept her place on the sofa defiant, while he stood before her, turning his back upon the elder offender, who felt this mark of her own unimportance even in the fever of her excitement and passion.

"Have you nothing to say against it?" cried Herbert, with anguish in his voice. "Giovanna! Giovanna! is it true?"

Giovanna shrugged her shoulders impatiently. "Mon Dieu," she said, "I did what I was told. They said to me, 'Do this,' and I did it; was it my fault? It was the old woman who did all, as Madame Suzanne says——"

"We are all involved together, God forgive us!" cried Miss Susan, bowing her head into her hands.

Then there was a terrible pause. They were all silent, all waiting to hear what Herbert had to say, who, by reason of being most deeply involved, seemed suddenly elevated into the judge. He went away from the sofa where Giovanna was, and in front of which Miss Susan was sitting, as far away as he could get, and began to walk up and down the room in his excitement. He took no further notice of Giovanna, but after a moment, pausing in his angry march, said suddenly, "It was all on Farrel-Austin's account you plunged into crime like this? Silence, Reine! it is crime, and it is she who is to blame. What in the name of heaven had Farrel-Austin done to you that you should avenge yourself upon us all like this?"

"Forgive me, Herbert!" said Miss Susan faintly; "he was to have married Augustine, and he forsook her, jilted her, shamed her, my only sister. How could I see him in this house?"

And then again there was a pause. Even Reine made no advance to the culprit, though her heart began to beat loudly, and her indignation was mingled with pity. Giovanna sat gloomy, drumming with her

foot upon the carpet. Herbert had resumed his rapid pacing up and down. Miss Susan sat in the midst of them, hopeless, motionless, her bowed head hidden in her hands, every help and friendly prop dropped away from her, enduring to the depths the bitterness of her punishment, yet perhaps, with a natural reaction, asking herself, was there none, none of all she had been kind to, capable of a word, a look, a touch of pity in this moment of her downfall and uttermost need? Both Everard and Reine felt upon them that strange spell which often seems to freeze all outward action in a great emergency, though their hearts were swelling. They had both, however, made a forward step at last; when suddenly the matter was taken out of their hands. Augustine was more slow than any of them, out of her abstraction and musing, to be roused to full understanding of what was being said. But the last words had supplied a sharp sting of personal reality which woke her fully, and helped her to understand. As soon as she had mastered it, she went up swiftly and silently to her sister, put her arms round her, and drew away the hands in which Miss Susan had buried her face.

"Susan," she said, in a voice more real and more

living than had been heard from her lips for years, "I have heard everything. You have confessed your sin, and God will forgive you. Come with me."

"Austine! Austine!" cried poor Miss Susan, shrinking, dropping to the floor at the feet of the immaculate creature who was to her as a saint.

"Yes, it is I," said Augustine. "Poor Susan! and I never knew! God will forgive you. Come with me."

"Yes," said the other, the elder and stronger, with the humility of a child; and she got up from where she had thrown herself, and casting a pitiful look upon them all, turned round and gave her hand to her sister. She was weak with her excitement, and exhausted as if she had risen from a long illness. Augustine drew her sister's hand through her arm, and without another word led her away. Reine rushed after them, weeping and anxious, the bonds loosed that seemed to have congealed her; but Augustine put her back, not unkindly, yet with decision. "Another time, Reine. She is going with me."

They were all so overawed by this sudden movement that even Herbert stopped short in his angry march, and Everard, who opened the door for their exit, could only look at them, and could not say a word. Miss

Susan hung on Augustine's arm, broken, shattered, feeble; an old woman, worn out and fainting. The recluse supporting her, with a certain air of strength and pride, strangely unlike her nature, walked on steadily and firmly, looking, as was her wont, neither to the right hand nor the left. All her life Susan had been her protector, her supporter, her stay. Now their positions had changed all in a moment. Erect and almost proud she walked out of the room, holding up the bowed-down, feeble figure upon her arm. And the young people, all so strangely, all so differently affected by this extraordinary revelation, stood blankly together and looked at each other, not knowing what to say, when the door closed. None of the three Austins spoke to or looked at Giovanna, who sat on the sofa, still drumming with her foot upon the carpet. When the first blank pause was over, Reine went up to Herbert and put her arm through his. "Oh, forgive her! forgive her!" she cried.

"I will never forgive her," he said wildly; "she has been the cause of it all. Why did she let this go on, my God! and why did she tell me now?"

Giovanna sat still, beating her foot on the carpet, and neither moved nor spoke.

As for Susan and Augustine, no one attempted to follow them. No one thought of anything further than a withdrawal to their rooms of the two sisters, united in a tenderness of far older date than the memories of the young people could reach; and I don't even know whether the impulse that made them both turn through the long passage towards the porch was the same. I don't suppose it was. Augustine thought of leading her penitent sister to the Almshouse chapel, as she would have wished should be done to herself in any great and sudden trouble; whereas an idea of another kind entered at once into the mind of Susan, which, beaten down and shaken as it was, began already to recover a little after having thrown off the burden. She paused a moment in the hall, and took down a grey hood which was hanging there, like Augustine's, a covering which she had adopted to please her sister on her walks about the roads near home. It was the nearest thing at hand, and she caught at it, and put it on, as both together with one simultaneous impulse they bent their steps to the door. I have said that the day was damp and dismal and hopeless, one of those days which make a despairing waste of a leafy country. Now and then there would come a miserable gust of wind, carrying floods of sickly

yellow leaves from all the trees, and in the intervals a small mizzling rain, not enough to wet anything, coming like spray in the wayfarers' faces, filled up the dreary moments. No one was out of doors who could be in; it was worse than a storm, bringing chill to the marrow of your bones, weighing heavy upon your soul. The two old sisters, without a word to each other, went out through the long passage, through the porch in which Miss Susan had sat and done her knitting so many summers through. She took no farewell look at the familiar place, made no moan as she left it. They went out clinging to each other, Augustine erect and almost proud, Susan bowed and feeble, across the sodden wet lawn, and out at the little gate in Priory Lane. They had done it a hundred and a thousand times before; they meant, or at least Miss Susan meant, to do it never again; but her mind was capable of no regret for Whiteladies. She went out mechanically, leaning on her sister, yet almost mechanically directing that sister the way Susan intended to go, not Augustine. And thus they set forth into the autumn weather, into the mists, into the solitary world. Had the departure been made publicly with solemn farewells and leave-takings, they would have felt it far more deeply. As it

was, they scarcely felt it at all, having their minds full of other things. They went along Priory Lane, wading through the yellow leaves, and along the road to the village, where Augustine would have turned to the left, the way to the Almshouses. They had not spoken a word to each other, and Miss Susan leant almost helplessly in her exhaustion upon her sister; but nevertheless she swayed Augustine in the opposite direction across the village street. One or two women came out to the cottage doors to look after them. It was a curious sight, instead of Miss Augustine, grey and tall and noiseless, whom they were all used to watch in the other direction, to see the two grey figures going on silently, one so bowed and aged as to be unrecognisable, exactly the opposite way. "She have got another with her, an old 'un," the women said to each other, and rubbed their eyes and were not half sure that the sight was real. They watched the two figures slowly disappearing round the corner. It came on to rain, but the wayfarers did not quicken their pace. They proceeded slowly on, neither saying a word to the other, indifferent to the rain, and to the yellow leaves that tumbled on their path. So, I suppose, with their heads bowed, and no glance behind, the first pair

may have gone desolate out of Paradise. But they were young, and life was before them; whereas Susan and Augustine, setting out forlorn upon their new existence, were old, and had no heart for another home and another life.

CHAPTER XIV.

WHEN a number of people have suddenly been brought together accidentally by such an extraordinary incident as that I have attempted to describe, it is almost as difficult for them to separate as it is to know what to do or what to say to each other. Herbert kept walking up and down the room, dispelling, or thinking he was dispelling, his wrath and excitement in that way. Giovanna sat on the sofa motionless, except her foot, with which she kept on beating the carpet. Reine, after trying to join herself to her brother, as I have said, and console him, went back to Everard, who had withdrawn to the window, the safest refuge for the perplexed spectator. Reine went to her betrothed, finding in him that refuge which is so great a safeguard to the mind in all circumstances. She was very anxious and unhappy, but it was about others, not about herself; and though there was a cloud of disquietude and pain upon her, as she stood by Everard's side, her face

turned towards the others, watching for any new event, yet Reine's mind had in itself such a consciousness of safe anchorage, and of a refuge beyond any one's power to interfere with, that the very trouble which had overtaken them seemed to add a fresh security to her internal well-being. Nothing that any one could say, nothing that any one could do, could interfere between her and Everard; and Everard for his part, with that unconscious selfishness *à deux*, which is like no other kind of selfishness, was not thinking of Herbert or Miss Susan, but only of his poor Reine, exposed to this agitation and trouble. "Oh, if I could only carry you away from it all, my poor darling!" he said in her ear.

Reine said, "Oh, hush, Everard, do not think of me," feeling indeed that she was not the chief sufferer, nor deserving, in the present case, of the first place in any one's sympathy; yet she was comforted. "Why does not she go away?—oh, if she would but go away!" she whispered, "and what shall we do?—what ought we to do?" Everard could only shake his head, not knowing what counsel to give; but yet the fact that there were two of them, though they could not tell how they ought to act, was comfort. Herbert, gloomy, angry, miserable, was but one.

While they thus remained as Miss Susan had left them, not knowing how to get themselves dispersed, there came a sudden sound of carriage wheels and loud knocking at the great door on the other side of the house, the door by which all strangers approached.

"Oh, as if we were not bad enough already, here are visitors!" cried Reine. And even Herbert seemed to listen, irritated by the unexpected commotion. Then followed the sound of loud voices, and a confused colloquy. "I must go and receive them, whoever it is," said Reine, with a moan over her fate. After a while steps were heard approaching, and the door was thrown open suddenly. "Not here, not here," cried Reine, running forward. "The drawing-room, Stevens."

"Beg pardon, ma'am," said Stevens, flushed and angry. "It ain't my fault. I can't help it. They won't be kep' back, Miss Reine," he cried, bending his head down to whisper to her. "Don't be frightened, Miss. It's the hold foreign gent——"

"Not here," cried Reine again. "Oh, whom did you say? Stevens, I tell you not here!"

"But he is here; the hold foreign gent," said Stevens, who seemed to be suddenly pulled back from behind by somebody following him. If there had been any

laughter in her, I think Reine would have laughed; but though the impulse gleamed across her distracted mind, the power was wanting. And there suddenly appeared facing her, in the place of Stevens, two people who took from poor Reine all inclination to laugh. One of them was an old man, spruce and dapper, in the elaborate travelling wraps of a foreigner of the bourgeois class, with a comforter tied round his neck, and a large greatcoat with a hood to it. The other was a young woman, fair and full, with cheeks momentarily paled by weariness and agitation, but now and then dyed deep with rosy colour. These two came to a momentary stop in their eager career, to gaze at Reine; but finally pushing past her, to her great amazement got before her into the room which she had been defending from them.

"I seek Madame Suzanne! I seek the lady—" said the old man.

At the sound of his voice Giovanna sprang to her feet; and as soon as they got sight of her, the two strangers made a startled pause. Then the young woman rushed forward and laid hold of her by the arm.

"Mon bébé! mon enfant! donne-moi mon bébé!" she said.

"Eh bien, Gertrude! c'est toi!" cried Giovanna. She was roused in a moment from the quiescent state, sullen or stupefied, into which she had fallen. She seemed to rise full of sudden energy and new life. "And the bon papa too! Tiens, this is something of extraordinary; but unhappily Madame Suzanne has just left us, she is not here. Suffer me to present to you my beau-père, M. 'Erbert; my belle-sœur Gertrude, of whom you have just heard. Give yourself the trouble to sit down, my parent. This is a pleasure very unattended. Had Madame Suzanne known—she talked of you tout à l'heure—no doubt she would have stayed——"

"Giovanna," cried the old man trembling, "you know, you must know, why we are here. Content this poor child, and restore to her her baby. Ah, traître! *her* baby, not thine. How could I be so blind—how could I be so foolish—and you so criminal, Giovanna? Your poor belle-mère has been ill, has been at the point of death, and she has told us all."

"Mon enfant!" cried the young woman clasping her hands. "My bébé, Giovanna; give me my bébé, and I pardon thee all."

"Ah! the belle-mère has made her confession, then?" said Giovanna. "C'est ça? Poor belle-mère! and poor

Madame Suzanne! who has come to do the same here. But none say 'Poor Giovanna.' Me, I am criminal, va! I am the one whom all denounce; but the others, they are then my victims, not I theirs!"

"Giovanna, Giovanna, I debate not with thee," cried the old man. "We say nothing to thee, nothing; we blame not, nor punish. We say, give back the child—ah, give back the child! Look at her, how her colour changes, how she weeps! Give her her bébé. We will not blame, nor say a word to thee, never!"

"No! you will but leave me to die of hunger," said Giovanna, "to die by the roads, in the fields, qu'importe? I am out of the law, me. Yet I have done less ill than the others. They were old, they had all they desired; and I was young, and miserable, and made mad—ah, ma Gertrude! by thee too, gentle as thou look'st, even by thee!"

"Giovanna, Giovanna!" cried Gertrude, throwing herself at Giovanna's feet. Her pretty upturned face looked round and innocent, like a child's, and the big tears ran down her cheeks. "Give me my bébé, and I will ask your pardon on my knees."

Giovanna made a pause, standing upright, with this stranger clinging to her dress, and looked round upon

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them all with a strange mixture of scorn and defiance and emotion. "Messieurs," she said, "and mademoiselle! you see what proof the bon Dieu has sent of all Madame Suzanne said. Was it my doing? No! I was obedient, I did what I was told; but, voyons! it will be I who shall suffer. Madame Suzanne is safe. You can do nothing to her; in a little while you will lofe her again, as before. The belle-mère, who is wicked, wickedest of all, gets better, and one calls her poor bonne-maman, pauvre petite mère! But me! I am the one who shall be cast away, I am the one to be punished; here, there, everywhere, I shall be kicked like a dog—yes, like a dog! All the pardon, the miséricorde will be for them—for me the punishment. Because I am the most weak! because I am the slave of all—because I am the one who has excuse the most!"

She was so noble in her attitude, so grand in her voice and expression, that Herbert stood and gazed at her like one spell-bound. But I do not think she remarked this, being for the moment transported out of herself by a passionate outburst of feeling—sense of being wronged—pity for herself, defiance of her enemies; and a courage and resolution mingling with all, which, if not very elevated in their origin, were intense enough to give

elevation to her looks. What an actress she would have made! Everard thought regretfully. He was already very pitiful of the forsaken creature at whom every one threw a stone.

"Giovanna, Giovanna!" cried the weeping Gertrude, clinging to her dress, "hear me! I will forgive you, I will love you. But give me my bébé, Giovanna, give me my child!"

Giovanna paused again, looking down upon the baby face, all blurred with crying. Her own face changed from its almost tragic force to a softer aspect. A kind of pity stole over it, then another and stronger sentiment. A gleam of humour came into her eyes. "Tenez," she said, "I go to have my revenge!" and drawing her dress suddenly from Gertrude's clasp, she went up to the bell, rang it sharply, and waiting, facing them all with a smile, "Monsieur Stevens," she said with the most enchanting courtesy, when the butler appeared, "will you have the goodness to bring to me, or to send to me, my boy, the little mas-ter Jean?"

After she had given this order she stood still waiting, all the profounder feeling of her face disappearing into an illumination of gaiety and fun, which none of the spectators understood. A few minutes elapsed while

this pause lasted. Martha, who thought Master Jean was being sent for to see company, hastily invested him in his best frock and ribbons. "And be sure you make your bow pretty, and say how do do," said innocent Martha, knowing nothing of the character of the visit, nor of the tragical change which had suddenly come upon the family life. The child came in with all the boldness of the household pet into the room in which so many excited people were waiting for him. His pretty fair hair was dressed according to the tradition of the British nursery, in a great flat curl on the top of his little head. He had his velvet frock on, with scarlet ribbons, and looked, as Martha proudly thought, "a little gentleman," every inch of him. He looked round him with childish complaisance as he came in, and made his little salute as Giovanna had taught him. But when Gertrude rushed towards him, as she did at once, and throwing herself on her knees beside him, caught him in her arms and covered him with kisses, little Jean was taken violently by surprise. A year's interval is eternity to such a baby. He knew nothing about Gertrude. He cried, struggled, fought to be free, and finally struck at her with his sturdy little fists.

"Mamma, mamma!" cried little Jean, holding out

appealing arms to Giovanna, who stood at a little distance, her fine nostrils expanded, a smile upon her lip, a gleam of mischief in her eyes.

"He will know *me*," said the old man, going to his daughter's aid. "A moment, give him a moment, Gertrude. A moi, Jeanot, à moi! Let him go, ma fille. Give him a moment to recollect himself; he has forgotten perhaps his language. Jeanot, my child, come to me!"

Jean paid no attention to these blandishments. When Gertrude, weeping, released by her father's orders her tight hold of the child, he rushed at once to Giovanna's side, and clung to her dress, and hid his face in its folds "Mamma, mamma, take Johnny!" he said.

Giovanna stooped, lifted him like a feather, and tossed him up to her shoulder with a look of triumph. "There thou are safe, no one can touch thee," she said; and turning upon her discomfited relations, looked down upon them both with a smile. It was her revenge, and she enjoyed it with all her heart. The child clung to her, clasping both his arms round hers, which she had raised to hold him fast. She laughed aloud—a laugh which startled every one, and woke the echoes all about.

"Tiens!" she said in her gay voice, "whose child is he now? Take him if you will, Gertrude, you who were always the first, who knew ourself in babies, who were more beloved than the upid Giovanna. Take him, then, since he is to thee!

What a picture she would have made, standing there with the child, her great eyes flashing, her bosom expanded, looking down upon the plebeian pair before her with a triumphant smile! So Everard thought, who by this time had entirely ranged himself on Giovanna's side; and so thought poor Herbert, looking at her with his heart beating, his whole being in a ferment, his temper and his nerves worn to their utmost. He went away trembling from the sight, and beckoned Reine to him, and threw himself into a chair at the other end of the room.

"What is all this rabble to us?" he cried querulously, when his sister answered his summons. "For heaven's sake, clear the house of strangers—get them away."

"All, Herbert?" said Reine frightened.

He made no further reply, but dismissed her with an impatient wave of his hand, and taking up a book, which she saw he held upside down, and which trembled in his hand, turned his back upon the new-comers who had so strangely invaded the house.

As for these good people, they had nothing to say to this triumph of Giovanna. I suppose they had expected, as many innocent persons do, that by mere force of nature the child would turn to those who alone had a right to him. Gertrude, encumbered by her heavy travelling wraps, wearied, discouraged and disappointed, sat down and cried, her round face getting every moment more blurred and unrecognisable. M. Guillaume, however, though tired too, and feeling this reception very different from the distinguished one which he had received on his former visit, felt it necessary to maintain the family dignity.

"I would speak with Madame Suzanne," he said turning to Reine, who approached. "Mademoiselle does not perhaps know that I am a relation, a next-of-kin. It is I, not the poor bébé, who am the next to succeed. I am Guillaume Austin, of Bruges. I would speak with Madame Suzanne. She will know how to deal with this insensée, this woman who keeps from my daughter her child."

"My aunt is—ill," said Reine. "I don't think she is able to see you. Will you come into another room and rest, and I will speak to Giovanna. You must want to rest—a little; and—something to eat——"

So far Reine's hospitable instincts carried her; but when Stevens entered with a request from the driver of the cab which had brought the strangers hither, to know what he was to do, she could not make any reply to the look that M. Guillaume gave her. That look plainly implied a right to remain in the house, which made Reine tremble, and she pretended not to see that she was referred to. Then the old shopkeeper took it upon himself to send away the man. "Madame Suzanne would be uncontent, certainly uncontent, if I went away without to see her," he said; "dismiss him then, mon ami. I will give you to pay——" and he pulled out a purse from his pocket. What could Reine do or say? She stood trembling, wondering how it was all to be arranged—what she could do; for though she was quite unaware of the withdrawal of Miss Susan, she felt that in this case it was her duty to act for her brother and herself. She went up to Giovanna softly, and touched her on the arm.

"What are you going to do?" she said in a whisper. "Oh, Giovanna, have some pity upon us! Get them to go away. My aunt Susan has been kind to you, and how could she see these people? Oh, get them to go away!"

Giovanna looked down upon Reine, too, with the same triumphant smile. "You come also," she said, "Mademoiselle Reine, you, too! to poor Giovanna, who was not good for anything. Bien! It cannot be for to-night, but perhaps for to-morrow, for they are fatigued—that sees itself. Gertrude, to cry will do nothing; it will frighten the child more, who is, as you perceive, to me, not to thee. Smile, then—that will be more well—and come with me, petite sotte. Though thou wert not good to Giovanna, Giovanna will be more noble, and take care of thee."

She took hold of her sister-in-law as she spoke, half dragged her off her chair, and leading her with her disengaged hand, walked out of the room with the child on her shoulder. Reine heard the sound of an impatient sigh, and hurried to her brother's side. But Herbert had his eyes firmly fixed upon the book, and when she came up to him waved her off.

"Let me alone," he said in his querulous tones, "cannot you let me alone!" Even the touch of tenderness was more than he could bear.

Then it was Everard's turn to exert himself, who had met M. Guillaume before. With a little trouble he persuaded the old shopkeeper to follow the others as

far as the small dining-room, in which Reine had given orders for a hasty meal. M. Guillaume was not unwilling to enter into explanations. His poor wife, he said, had been ill for weeks past.

"It was some mysterious attack of the nerves; no one could tell what it was," the old man said. "I called doctor after doctor, if you will believe me. I spared no expense. At last it was said to me, 'It is a priest that is wanted, not a doctor.' I am Protestant, monsieur," said the old shopkeeper seriously. "I replied with disdain, 'According to my faith, it is the husband, it is the father who is priest.' I go to Madame Austin's chamber. I say to her, 'My wife, speak!' Brief, monsieur, she spoke, that suffering angel, that martyr! She told us of the wickedness which Madame Suzanne and cette méchante planned, and how she was drawn to be one with them, pauvre chérie. Ah, monsieur, how women are weak! or when not weak, wicked. She told us all, monsieur, how she has been unhappy! and as soon as we could leave her, we came, Gertrude and I, though for my part, I was not pressé. I said, 'Thou hast many children, my Gertrude; leave then this one to be at the expense of those who have acted so vilely.' And my poor angel said so also from her

sick bed; but the young they are obstinate, they have no reason, and—behold us! We had a bad, a very bad traversée; and it appears that la jeune-là, whom I know not, would willingly send us back without the repose of an hour."

"You must pardon her," said Everard. "We have been in great trouble, and she did not know even who you were."

"It seems to me," said the old man, opening his coat with a flourish of offended dignity, "that in this house, which may soon be mine, all should know me. When I say I am Guillaume Austin of Bruges, what more rests to say?"

"But, Monsieur Guillaume," said Everard, upon whom these words, "this house, which may soon be mine," made, in spite of himself, a highly disagreeable impression, "I have always heard that for yourself you cared nothing for it—would not have it, indeed."

"I would not give that for it," said the old man with a snap of his fingers; "a miserable grange, a maison de campagne, a thing of wood and stone! But one has one's dignity and one's rights."

And he elevated his old head, with a snort from the Austin nose, which he possessed in its most pro-

nounced form. Everard did not know whether to take him by the shoulders and to turn him out of the house, or to laugh; but the latter was the easiest. The old shopkeeper was like an old cock strutting about the house which he despised. "I hate your England," he said, "your rain, your autumn, your old baraques which you call châteaux. For châteaux come to my country, come to the Pays Bas, monsieur. No, I would not change, I care not for your dirty England. But," he added, "one has one's dignity and one's rights, all the same."

He was mollified, however, when Stevens came to help him off with his coats, and when Cook sent up the best she could supply on such short notice.

"I thought perhaps, M. Austin, you would like to rest before—dinner," said Reine, trembling as she said the last word. She hoped still that he would interrupt her, and add "before we go."

But no such thought entered into M. Guillaume's mind. He calculated on staying a few days now that he was here, as he had done before, and being made much of, as then. He inclined his head politely in answer to Reine's remark, and said, Yes, he would be pleased to rest before dinner; the journey was long and

very fatiguing. He thought even that after dinner he would retire at once, that he might be well to-morrow. "And I hope, mademoiselle, that your villainous weather will se remettre," he added. "Bon Dieu, what it must be to live in this country! When the house comes to me, I will sell it, monsieur. The money will be more sweet elsewhere than in this vieux manoir délabré, though it is so much to you."

"But you cannot sell it," said Reine, flushing crimson, "if it ever should come to you."

"Who will prevent me?" said M. Guillaume. "Ah, your maudit law of heritage! Tiens! then I will pull it down, mademoiselle," he said calmly, sipping the old claret, and making her a little bow.

The reader may judge how agreeable M. Guillaume made himself by this kind of conversation. He was a great deal more at his ease than he had ever been with Miss Susan, of whom he stood in awe.

"After this misfortune, this surprise," he went on, "which has made so much to suffer my poor wife, it goes of my honour to take upon myself the place of heir. I cannot more make any arrangement, any bargain, monsieur perceives, that one should be able to say Guillaume Austin of Bruges deceived the world to put in his little

son, against the law, to be the heir! Oh these women, these women, how they are weak and wicked! When I heard of it I wept. I, a man, an old! my poor angel has so much suffered; I forgave her when I heard her tale; but that méchante, that Giovanna, who was the cause of all, how could I forgive—and Madame Suzanne? Apropos, where is Madame Suzanne? She comes not, I see her not. She is afraid, then, to present herself before me."

This was more than Reine's self-denial could bear. "I do not know who you are," she cried indignantly. "I never heard there were any Austins who were not gentlemen. Do not stop me, Everard. This house is my brother's house, and I am his representative. We have nothing to do with you, heir or not heir, and know nothing about your children, or your wife, or any one belonging to you. For poor Giovanna's sake, though no doubt you have driven her to do wrong through your cruelty, you shall have what you want for to-night. Miss Susan Austin afraid of *you!* Everard, I cannot stay any longer to hear my family and my home insulted. See that they have what they want!" said the girl ablaze with rage and indignation.

M. Guillaume, perhaps, had been taking too much

of the old claret in his fatigue, and he did not understand English very well when delivered with such force and rapidity. He looked after her with more surprise than anger when Reine, a little too audibly in her wrath, shut behind her the heavy oak door.

"Eh bien?" he said. "Mademoiselle is irritable, n'est-ce pas? And what did she mean, then—for Giovanna's sake?"

Everard held it to be needless to explain Reine's innocent flourish of trumpets in favour of the culprit. He said, "Ah, that is the question. What do you mean to do about Giovanna, M. Guillaume?"

"Do!" cried the old man, and he made a coarse but forcible gesture, as of putting something disagreeable out of his mouth, "she may die of hunger, as she said—by the road, by the fields—for anything she will get from me."

CHAPTER XV.

I NEED not say that the condition of Whiteladies that evening was about as uncomfortable as could be conceived. Before dinner—a ceremonial at which Everard alone officiated, with the new-comers and Giovanna, all of whom ate a very good dinner—it had been discovered that Miss Susan had not gone to her own room, but to her new house, from which a messenger arrived for Martha in the darkening of the winterly afternoon. The message was from Miss Augustine, written in her pointed, old-fashioned hand; and requesting that Martha would bring everything her mistress required for the night; Augustine forgot that she herself wanted anything. It was old John Simmons, from the Almshouses, who brought the note, and who told the household that Miss Augustine had been there as usual for the evening service. The intimation of this sudden removal fell like a thunderbolt upon the house. Martha, crying, packed her little box, and went off in

the early darkness, not knowing, as she said, whether she was "on her head or heels," and thinking every tree a ghost as she went along the unfamiliar road, through the misty dreary night. Herbert had retired to his room, where he would not admit even his sister, and Reine, sad and miserable, with a headache as well as a heart-ache, not knowing what was the next misfortune that might happen, wandered up and down all the evening through, fretting at Everard's long absence, though she had begged him to undertake the duties of host, and longing to see Giovanna and talk to her, with a desire that was half liking and half hatred. Oh, how dared she, how dared she live among them with such a secret on her mind? Yet what was to become of her? Reine felt with a mixture of contempt and satisfaction that, so far as Herbert was concerned, Giovanna's chances were all over for ever. She flitted about the house, listening with wonder and horror to the sound of voices from the dining-room, which were cheerful enough in the midst of the ruin and misery that these people had made. Reine was no more just, no more impartial, than the rest. She said to herself, "which *these people* had made," and pitied poor Miss Susan whose heart was broken by it, just as M. Guillaume pitied his suffer-

ing angel, his poor wife. Reine on her side threw all the guilt upon that suffering angel. Poor Giovanna had done what she was told, but it was the wretched old woman, the vulgar schemer, the wicked old Fleming who had planned the lie in all its details, and had the courage to carry it out. All Reine's heart flowed over with pity for the sinner who was her own. Poor Aunt Susan! what could she be thinking? how could she be feeling in the solitude of the strange new house! No doubt believing that the children to whom she had been so kind had abandoned her. It was all Reine could do to keep herself from going with Martha, to whom she gave a hundred messages of love. "Tell her I wanted to come with you, but could not because of the visitors. Tell her the old gentleman from Bruges—Bruges, Martha, you will not forget the name—came here directly she had gone; and that I hope he is going away to-morrow, and that I will come to her at once. Give her my dear love, Martha," cried the girl, following Martha out to the porch, and standing there in the darkness watching her, while Miss Susan's maid walked out unwillingly into the night, followed by the under-gardener with her baggage. This was while the others were at dinner, and it was then that Reine saw the

cheerful light through the great oriel window, and heard the voices sounding cheerful too, she thought, notwithstanding the strange scenes they had just gone through. She was so restless and so curious that she stole upstairs into the musicians' gallery, to see what they were doing. Giovanna was the mistress of the situation still; but she seemed to be using her power in a merciful way. The serious part of the dinner was concluded, and little Jean was there, whom Giovanna—throwing sweetmeats across the table to Gertrude, who sat with her eyes fixed upon her as upon a goddess—was beguiling into recollection of and friendship with the new-comers. "C'est Maman Gertrude; c'est ton autre maman," she was saying to the child. "Tiens, all the bonbons are with her. I have given all to her. Say 'Maman Gertrude,' and she will give thee some." There was a strained air of gaiety and patronage about Giovanna, or so at least Reine thought, and she went away guiltily from this peep at them, feeling herself an eavesdropper, and thinking she saw Everard look up to the corner he too knew so well; and thus the evening passed, full of agitation and pain. When the strangers were got to their rooms at last, Everard found a little eager ghost, with great anxious eyes, upon the stairs waiting for him;

and they had a long eager talk in whispers, as if anybody could hear them. "Giovanna is behaving like a brick," said Everard. "She is doing all she can to content the child with the new people. Poor little beggar! I don't wonder he kicks at it. She had her little triumph, poor girl, but she's acting like a hero now. What do you think, Reine? Will Herbert go on with it in spite of all?"

"If I were Herbert—" cried the girl—then stopped in her impulsive rapid outcry. "He is changed," she said, tears coming to her eyes. "He is no longer my Bertie, Everard. No, we need not vex ourselves about that; we shall never hear of it any more."

"So much the better," said Everard; "it never would have answered; though one does feel sorry for Giovanna. Reine, my darling, what a blessing that old Susan, God help her, had the courage to make a clean breast of it before these others came!"

"I never thought of that," said the girl, awestricken. "So it was, so it was! It must have been Providence that put it into her head."

"It was Herbert's madness that put it into her head. How could he be such a fool! but it is curious, you know, what set both of them on it at the same time,

that horrible old woman at Bruges, and *her* here. It looks like what they call a brain-wave," said Everard, "though that throws a deal of light on the matter, don't it? Queenie, you are as white as the China rose on the porch. I hope Julie is there to look after you. My poor little queen! I wonder why all this trouble should fall upon you."

"Oh, what is it to me in comparison?" said the girl, almost indignant; but he was so sorry for her, and his tender pity was in itself so sweet, that I think before they separated—her head still aching, though her heart was less sore—Reine, out of sympathy for him, had begun also to entertain a little pity for herself.

The morning rose strangely on the disturbed household—rose impudently, without the least compassion for them, in a blaze of futile, too early sunshine, which faded after the first half of the day. The light seemed to look in mocking at the empty rooms in which Susan and Augustine had lived all their lives. Reine was early astir, unable to rest; and she had not been downstairs ten minutes when all sorts of references were made to her. "I should like to know, miss, if you please, who is to give the orders, if so be as Miss Susan

have gone for good," said Stevens; and Cook came up immediately after with her arms wrapped in her apron. "I won't keep you not five minutes, miss; but if Miss Susan's gone for good, I don't know as I can find it convenient to stay. Where there's gentlemen and a deal of company isn't like a lady's place, where there's a quiet life," said Cook. "Oh," said Reine, driven to her wits' end, "please, please, like good people, wait a little! How can I tell what we must do?" The old servants granted Reine the "little time" she begged, but they did it ungraciously and with a sure sense of supremacy over her. Happily she found a variety of trays with coffee going up to the strangers' rooms, and found, to her great relief, that she would escape the misery of a breakfast with them; and François brought a message from Herbert to the effect that he was quite well, but meant to stay in his room till ces gens-là were out of the house. "May I not go to him?" cried Reine. "Monsieur is quite well," François replied; "Mademoiselle may trust me. But it will be well to leave him till ce monsieur and ces dames have gone away." And François too, though he was very kind to Mademoiselle Reine, gave her to understand that she should take precautions, and that Monsieur should not be exposed to

scenes so trying; so that the household, with very good intentions, was hard upon Reine. And it was nearly noon before she saw anything of the other party, about whose departure she was so anxious. At last about twelve o'clock, perilously near the time of the train, she met Giovanna on the stairs. The young woman was pale, with the gaiety and the triumph gone out of her. "I go to ask that the carriage may be ready," said Giovanna. "They will go at midi, if Mademoiselle will send the carriage."

"Yes, yes," said Reine eagerly. "But you are ill, Giovanna; you are pale," she added half timidly, after a moment, "what are you going to do?"

Giovanna smiled with something of the bravado of the previous day. "I will derange no one," she said; "Mademoiselle need not fear. I will not seek again those who have deserted me. C'est petit, ça!" she cried with a momentary outburst, waving her hand towards the door of Herbert's room. Then controlling herself, "That they should go is best, n'est-ce pas? I work for that. If Mademoiselle will give the orders for the carriage——"

"Yes, yes," said Reine, and then in her pity she laid her hand on Giovanna's arm. "Giovanna, I am very

sorry for you. I do not think you are the most to blame," she said.

"Blame!" said Giovanna, with a shrug of her shoulders, "I did as I was told." Then two big tears came into her eyes. She put her white, large, shapely hands on Reine's shoulders, and kissed her suddenly on both her cheeks. "You, you are good, you have a heart!" she said; "but to abandon the friends when they are in trouble, c'est petit, ça!" and with that she turned hastily and went back to her room. Reine, breathless, ran down-stairs to order the carriage. She went to the door with her heart beating, and stood waiting to see what would happen, not knowing whether Giovanna's kiss was to be taken as a farewell. Presently voices were heard approaching, and the whole party came down-stairs; the old man in his big coat, with his *cache-nez* about his neck, Gertrude pale but happy, and last of all Giovanna, in her usual household dress, with the boy on her shoulder. Gertrude carried in her hand a large packet of bonbons, and got hastily into the carriage, while her father stood bowing and making his little farewell speeches to Reine and Everard. Giovanna coming after them with her strong light step, her head erect, and the child, in his little velvet coat with his cap and

feather, seated on her shoulder, his hand twisted in her hair, interested them more than all M. Guillaume's speeches. Giovanna went past them to the carriage door; she had a flush upon her cheek which had been so pale. She put the child down upon Gertrude's lap, and kissed him. "Mama will come to Jean presently. in a moment," she said. "Regarde donc! how much of bonbons are in Mama Gertrude's lap. Thou wilt eat them all, petit gourmand, and save none for me."

Then with a laugh and mocking menace she stepped back into a corner, where she was invisible to the child, and stood there motionless till the old man got in beside his daughter, and the carriage drove away. A little cry, wondering and wistful, "Mamma! mamma!" was the last sound audible as the wheels crashed over the gravel. Reine turned round, holding out her hands to the forlorn creature behind her, her heart full of pity. The tears were raining down in a storm from Giovanna's eyes, but she laughed and shook them away. "Mon Dieu!" she cried, "I do not know why is this. Why should I love him? I am not his mother. But it is an attack of the nerfs—I cannot bear any more," and drawing her hands out of Reine's she fled with a strange shame and passion, through the dim passages. They heard her go up-stairs.

and, listening in some anxiety, after a few minutes' interval, heard her moving about her room with brisk, active steps.

"That is all right," said Everard, with a sigh of relief. "Poor Giovanna! some one must be kind to her; but come in here and rest, my queen. All this is too much for you."

"Oh, what is it to me in comparison?" cried Reine; but she suffered herself to be led into the drawing-room to be consoled and comforted, and to rest before anything more was done. She thought she kept an ear alert to listen for Giovanna's movements, but I suppose Everard was talking too close to that ear to make it so lively as it ought to have been. At least before anything was heard by either of them, Giovanna in her turn had gone away.

She came down stairs carefully, listening to make sure that no one was about. She had put up all her little possessions ready to be carried away. Pausing in the corridor above to make sure that all was quiet, she went down with her swift, light step, a step too firm and full of character to be noiseless, but too rapid at the present moment to risk awaking any spies. She went along the winding passages, and out through the great porch,

and across the damp grass. The afternoon had begun to set in by this time, and the fading sunshine of the morning was over. When she had reached the outer gate she turned back to look at the house. Giovanna was not a person of taste; she thought not much more of Whiteladies than her father-in-law did. "Adieu, vieil baraque," she said, kissing the tips of her fingers; but the half-contempt of her words was scarcely carried out by her face. She was pale again, and her eyes were red. Though she had declared frankly that she saw no reason for loving little Jean, I suppose the child—whom she had determined to make fond of her, as it was not comme il faut that a mother and child should detest each other—had crept into her heart, though she professed not to know it. She had been crying, though she would not have admitted it, over his little empty bed, and those red rims to her eyes were the consequence. When she had made that farewell to the old walls she turned and went on, swiftly and lightly as a bird, skimming along the ground, her erect figure full of health and beautiful strength, vigour, and unconscious grace. She looked strong enough for anything, her firm foot ringing in perfect measure on the path, like a Roman woman in a procession, straight and noble, more vigorous,

more practical, more alive than the Greek; fit to be made a statue of or a picture; to carry water-jars or grape-baskets, or children; almost to till the ground or sit upon a throne. The air cleared away the redness from her eyes, and brought colour back to her cheeks. The *grand air*, the *plein jour*, words in which, for once in a way, the French excel us in the fine abundance and greatness of the ideas suggested, suited Giovanna; though she loved comfort too, and could be as indolent as heart could desire. But to-day she wanted the movement, the sense of rapid progress. She wore her usual morning-dress of heavy blue serge, so dark as to be almost black, with a kind of cloak of the same material, the end of which was thrown over the shoulder in a fashion of her own. The dress was perfectly simple, without flounce or twist of any kind in its long lines. Such a woman, so strong, so swift, so dauntless, carrying her head with such a light and noble grace, might have been a queen's messenger, bound on affairs of life and death, carrying pardon and largesse, or laws and noble ordinances of state, from some throned Ida, some visionary princess. Though she did not know her way, she went straight on, finding it by instinct, seeing the high roof and old red walls of the Grange ever so far off, as only

her penetrating eyes and noble height could have managed to see. She recovered her spirits as she walked on, and nodded and smiled with careless good-humour to the women in the village, who came to their doors to look after her, moved by that vague consciousness which somehow gets into the very atmosphere, of something going on at Whiteladies. "Something's up," they all said; though how they knew I cannot tell, nor could they themselves have told.

The gate of the Grange, which was surrounded by shrubberies, stood open, and so did the door of the house, as generally happens when there has been a removal; for servants and workpeople have a fine sense of appropriateness, and prefer to be and to look as uncomfortable as possible at such a crisis. Giovanna went in without a moment's hesitation. The door opened into a square hall, which gave entrance to several rooms, the sitting-rooms of the house. One of these doors only was shut, and this Giovanna divined must be the one occupied. She neither paused nor knocked nor asked admittance, but went straight to it, and opening the door, walked in without a word into the room in which, as she supposed, Miss Susan was. She was not noiseless, as I have said; there was nothing

of the cat about her; her foot sounded light and regular with a frankness beyond all thought of stealth. The sound of it had already roused the lonely occupant of the room. Miss Susan was lying on a sofa, worn out with the storm of yesterday, and looking old and feeble. She raised herself on her elbow, wondering who it was; and it startled her, no doubt, to see this young woman enter, who was, I suppose, the last person in the world she expected to see.

"Giovanna, you!" she cried, and a strange shock ran through her, half of pain—for Reine *might* have come by this time, she could not but think—yet strangely mixed, she could not tell how, with a tinge of pleasure too.

"Madame Suzanne, yes," said Giovanna, "it is me. I know not what you will think. I come back to you, though you have cast me away. All the world also has cast me away," she added with a smile; "I have no one to whom I can go; but I am strong, I am young; I am not a lady, as you say. I know to do many things that ladies cannot do. I can frotter and brush when it is necessary. I can make the garden; I can conduct your carriage; many things more that I need not name. Even I can make the kitchen, or the robes

when it is necessary. I come to say, Take me then for your butlare, like old Stefan. I am more strong than he; I do many more things. Écoutez, Madame Suzanne! I am alone, very alone; I know not what may come to me; but one perishes not when one can work. It is not for that I come. It is that I have de l'amitié for you."

Miss Susan made an incredulous exclamation and shook her head; though I think there was a sentiment of a very different and, considering all the circumstances, very strange character rising in her heart.

"You believe me not? Bien!" said Giovanna, "nevertheless it is true. You have not loved me—which, perhaps, it is not possible, that one should love me; you have looked at me as your enemy. Yes; it was tout naturel. Notwithstanding, you were kind. You spared nothing," said the practical Giovanna. "I had to eat and to drink like you; you did not refuse the robes when I needed them. You were good, all good for me, though you did not love me. Eh bien, Madame Suzanne," she said suddenly, the tears coming to her eyes, "I love you! You may not believe it, but it is true."

"Giovanna! I don't know what to say to you," fal-

tered Miss Susan, feeling some moisture start into the corners of her own eyes.

"Écoutez," she said again; "is it that you know what has happened since you went away? Madame Suzanne, it is true that I wished to be Madame Herbert, that I tried to make him love me. Was it not tout naturel? He was rich and I had not a sou, and it is pleasant to be grande dame, great ladye, to have all that one can desire. Mon Dieu, how that is agreeable! I made great effort, I deny it not. D'ailleurs, it was very necessary that the petit should be put out of the way. Look you, that is all over. He abandons me. He regards me not even; says not one word of pity when I had the most great need. Allez," cried Giovanna indignantly, her eyes flashing, "c'est petit, ça!" She made a pause, with a great expansion and heave of her breast, then resumed. "But, Madame Suzanne, although it happened all like that, I am glad, glad—I thank the bon Dieu on my knees—that you did speak it then, not now; that day, not this; that you have not lose the moment, the just moment. For that I thank the bon Dieu."

"Giovanna, I hope the bon Dieu will forgive us," Miss Susan said, very humbly putting her hands across her eyes.

"I hope so also," said Giovanna cheerfully, as if that matter were not one which disturbed her very much; "but it was good, good that you spoke the first. The belle-mère had also remorse; she had bien de quoi! She sent them to say all, to take back—the child. Madame Suzanne," cried Giovanna, "listen! I have given him back to Gertrude; I have taught him to be sage with her. I have made to smile her and the beau-père, and showed bounty to them. All that they would I have done, and asked nothing; for what? that they might go away, that they might not vex personne, that there might not be so much of talk. Tenez, Madame Suzanne! And they go when I am weary with to speak, with to smile, with to make excuse—they go, enfin! and I return to my chamber, and the little bed is empty, and the petit is gone away!"

There was no chair near her on which she could sit down, and at this point she dropped upon the floor and cried, the tears falling in a sudden storm over her cheeks. They had long been gathering, making her eyes hot and heavy. Poor Giovanna! She cried like a child with keen emotion, which found relief in that violent utterance. "N'importe!" she said, struggling against the momentary passion, forcing a tremulous smile upon

the mouth which quivered, "n'importe! I shall get over it; but figure to yourself the place empty, empty! and so still! Why should I care? I am not his mother," said Giovanna; and wept as if her heart would break.

Miss Susan rose from her sofa. She was weak and tottered as she got up. She went to Giovanna's side, laid her hand on her head, and stooping over her kissed her on the forehead. "Poor thing! poor thing!" she said, in a trembling voice, "this is my doing too."

"It is nothing, nothing!" cried Giovanna, springing up and shaking back the loose locks of her black hair. "Now I will go and see what is to do. Put thyself on the sofa, Madame Suzanne. Ah, pardon! I said it without thought."

Miss Susan did not understand what it was for which Giovanna begged pardon. It did not occur to her that the use of the second person could, in any case, be sin; but Giovanna, utterly shocked and appalled at her own temerity, blushed crimson and almost forgot little Jean. She led Miss Susan back to the sofa, and placed her there with the utmost tenderness. "Madame Suzanne must not think that it was more than an inadvertence, a fault of excitement, that I could take it upon me to say *thee* to my superior. Oh, pardon! a thousand

times. Now I go to bring you of the thé, to shut the door close, to make quiet the people, that all shall be as Viteladies. I am Madame Suzanne's servant from this hour."

"Giovanna," said Miss Susan, who, just at this moment, was very easily agitated and did not so easily recover herself, "I do not say no. We have done wrong together; we will try to be good together. I have made you suffer too; but, Giovanna, remember there must be nothing more of *that*. You must promise me that all shall be over between you and Herbert."

"Bah!" said Giovanna, with a gesture of disgust. "Me, I suffered as Madame Suzanne says; and he saw, and never said a word; not so much as, 'Poor Giovanna!' Allez! c'est petit, ça!" cried the young woman, tossing her fine head aloft with a pride of nature that sate well on her. Then she turned smiling to Miss Susan on the sofa. "Rest, my mistress," she said softly, with quaint distinctness of pronunciation. "Mademoiselle Reine will soon be here to talk, and make everything plain to you. I go to bring of the thé, me."

CHAPTER XVI.

HERBERT came into the drawing-room almost immediately after Giovanna left. François had watched the carriage go off, and I suppose he thought that Giovanna was in it with the others; and his master, feeling free and safe, went down-stairs. Herbert had not been the least sufferer in that eventful day and night. He had been sadly weakened by a course of flattery, and had got to consider himself, in a sense, the centre of the world. Invalidism by itself produces this feeling easily enough; and when upon a long invalid life was built the superstructure of sudden consequence and freedom, the dazzling influence of unhoped-for prosperity and well-being, the worship to which every young man of wealth and position is more or less subjected, the wooing of his cousins, the downright flattery of Giovanna, the reader will easily perceive how the young man's head was turned, not being a strong head by nature. I think (though I express the opinion with diffi-

dence, not having studied the subject) that it is your vain man, your man whose sense of self-importance is very elevated, who feels a deception most bitterly. The more healthy soul regrets and suffers, but does not feel the same sting in the wound, that he does to whom a sin against himself is the one thing unpardonable. Herbert took the story of Giovanna's deception thus, as an offence against himself. That she should have deceived others, was little in comparison; but him! that he should be, as it were, the centre of this plot, surrounded by people who had planned and conspired in such pitiful ways! His pride was too deeply hurt, his self-importance too rudely shaken, to leave him free to any access of pity or consideration for the culprits. He was not sorry even for Miss Susan; and towards Giovanna and her strange relatives, and the hideous interruption to his comfort and calm which they had produced, he had no pity. Nor was he able to discriminate between her ordinary character and this one evil which she had done. Being once lowered in his imagination, she fell altogether, his chief attraction to her, indeed, being her beauty, which hitherto had dazzled and kept him from any inquiry into her other qualities. Now he gave Giovanna no credit for any qualities at all. His

wrath was hot and fierce against her. She had taken him in, defrauded him of those tender words and caresses which he never, had he known it, would have wasted on such a woman. She had humbled him in his own opinion, had made him feel thus that he was not the great person he had supposed; for her interested motives, which were now evident, were so many detractions from his glory, which he had supposed had drawn her towards him, as flowers are drawn to the sun. He had so low an opinion of her after this discovery, that he was afraid to venture out of his room, lest he should be exposed to some encounter with her, and to the tears and prayers his embittered vanity supposed she must be waiting to address to him. This was the chief reason of his retirement, and he was so angry that Reine and Everard should still keep all their wits about them, notwithstanding that he had been thus insulted and wounded, and could show feeling for others, and put up with those detestable visitors, that he almost felt that they too must be included in the conspiracy. It was necessary, indeed, that the visitors should be looked after, and even (his reason allowed) conciliated to a certain extent, to get them away; but still, that his sister should be able to do it, irritated Herbert. He

came down, accordingly, in anything but a gracious state of mind. Poor fellow! I suppose his sudden downfall from the (supposed) highest level of human importance, respected and feared and loved by everybody, to the chastened grandeur of one who was first with nobody, though master of all; and who was not of paramount personal importance to any one, had stung him almost beyond bearing. Miss Susan, whom he felt he had treated generously, had deceived, then left him without a word. Reine, to whom perhaps he had not been so kind, had stolen away, out of his power to affect her in any primary degree, had found a new refuge for herself; and Giovanna, to whom he had given that inestimable treasure of his love! Poor Herbert's heart was sore and sick, and full of mortified feeling. No wonder he was querulous and irritable. He came into the room where the lovers were, offended even by the sight of them together. When they dropped apart at his entrance, he was more angry still. Indeed, he felt angry at anything, ready to fight with a fly.

"Don't let me disturb you," he said; "though, indeed, if you don't mind, and can put up with it for a few minutes, I should be glad to speak to you together. I have been thinking that it is impossible for me to go on in this

way, you know. Evidently, England will not do for me. It is not October yet, and see what weather! I cannot bear it. It is a necessity of my nature, putting health out of the question, to have sunshine and brightness. I see nothing for it but to go abroad."

Reine's heart gave a painful leap. She looked at Everard with a wistful question in her eyes. "Dear Bertie, if you think so," she said faltering, "of course I will not object to what you like best. But might we not first consult the doctors? You were so well before that night. Oh, Bertie, you know I would never set myself against what was best for you—but I *should* like to stay at home, just for a little; and the weather will get better. October is generally fine, is it not, Everard? You ought to know——"

"You don't understand me," said Herbert again. "You may stay at home as much as you like. You don't suppose I want *you* to go. Look here, I suppose I may speak plainly to two people engaged to each other, as you are. Why shouldn't you marry directly, and be done with it? Then you could live on at Whiteladies, and Everard could manage the property; he wants something to do—which would leave me free to follow my inclinations, and live abroad."

"Bertie!" cried Reine, crimson with surprise and pain.

"Well! is there anything to make a fuss about? You mean to be married, I suppose. Why wait? It might be got over, surely, in a month or so. And then, Reine being disposed of," he went on with the most curious unconsciousness, "would not need to be any burden on me; she would want no brother to look after her. I could move about as I please, which a man never can do when he has to drag a lady after him. I think my plan is a very good plan, and why you should find any fault with it, Reine—you, for whose benefit it is——"

Reine said nothing. Tears of a mortification different from her brother's came into her eyes. Perhaps the mortification was unreasonable; for, indeed, a sister who allows herself to be betrothed does in a way take the first step in abandoning her brother! But to be cast off in this cool and sudden way went to her heart, notwithstanding the strong moral support she had of Everard behind her. She had served, and (though he was not aware of it) protected, and guided for so long the helpless lad, whose entire comfort had depended on her. And even Everard could not console her for this sudden, almost contemptuous, almost insolent dis-

missal. With her face crimson and her heart beating, she turned away from her ungrateful brother.

"You ought not to speak to me so," cried the girl with bitter tears in her eyes. "You should not throw me off like an old glove; it is not your part, Bertie." And with her heart very heavy and sore, and her quick temper aflame, she hurried away out of the room, leaving them; and, like the others who had gone before, set off by the same oft-trodden road, through the village, to the Grange. Already Miss Susan's new home had become the general family refuge from all evil.

When Reine was gone, Bertie's irritation decreased; for one man's excited temper cannot but subdue itself speedily, when it has to beat against the blank wall of another man's indifference. Everard did not care so very much if he was angry or not. He could afford to let Herbert and all the rest of the world cool down, and take their own way. He was sorry for the poor boy, but any exhibition of temper which Herbert might make, did not affect deeply the elder man; his elder in years, and twice his elder in experience. Herbert soon calmed down under this process, and then they had a long and serious conversation. Nor did Everard think the proposal at all unreasonable. From disgust, or

temper, or disappointment, or for health's sake—what did it matter which?—the master of Whiteladies had determined to go abroad. And what so natural as that Reine's marriage should take place early, there being no reason whatever why they should wait? or that Everard, as her husband, and himself the heir presumptive, should manage the property, and live with his wife in the old house? The proposal had not been delicately made, but it was kind enough. Everard forgave the roughness more readily than Reine could do, and accepted the good-will heartily, taking it for granted that brotherly kindness was its chief motive. He undertook to convince Reine that nothing could be more reasonable, nothing more kind.

"It removes the only obstacle that was in our way," said Everard, grasping his cousin's hand warmly. "God bless you, Bertie. I hope you'll some time be as happy —more happy you can't be."

Poor Bertie took this salutation but grimly, wincing from every such touch, but refused at once Everard's proposal that they should follow Reine to see Miss Susan.

"You may go if you like," he said; "people feel things in different ways, some deeper, some more lightly.

I don't blame you, but I can't do it. I couldn't speak to her if she were here."

"Send her a message, at least," said Everard; "one word—that you forgive her."

"I don't forgive her!" cried the young man, hurrying back to the shelter of his room, where he shut himself up with François. "To-morrow we shall leave this cursed place," he said in his anger to that faithful servant. "I cannot bear it another day."

Everard followed Reine to the Grange, and the first sight he saw made him thank heaven that Herbert was not of the party. Giovanna opened the door to him, smiling and at her ease. She ushered him into Miss Susan's sitting-room, then disappeared, and came back, bringing more tea, serving every one. She was thoroughly in her element, moving briskly about the old new house, arranging the furniture, which as yet was mere dead furniture, without any associations, making a new Whiteladies out of the unfamiliar place.

"It is like a conte des fées, but it is true," she said. "I have always had de l'amitié for Madame Suzanne; now I shall hold the ménage, me. I shall do all things that she wishes. Tiens! it is what I was made for, Monsieur Everard. I am not born ladye, as you say.

I am peuple, très-peuple. I can work. Mon Dieu, who else has been kind to me? Not one. As for persons who abandon a friend when they have great need, *that* for them!" said Giovanna, snapping her fingers, her eyes flashing, her face reddening. "C'est petit, ça!"

And there she remains, and has done for years. I am afraid she is not half so penitent as she ought to be for the almost crime which, in conjunction with the others, she carried out so successfully for a time. She shrugs her shoulders when by chance, in the seclusion of the family, any one refers to it; but the sin never lay very heavy on her conscience, nor does it affect her tranquillity now. Neither is she ashamed of her pursuit of Herbert, which, so long as it lasted, seemed *tout simple* to the young woman. And I do not think she is at all conscious that it was he who threw her over, but rather has the satisfaction of feeling that her own disgust at his *petitesse* ended the matter. But while she has no such feeling as she ought to have for these enormities, she does feel deeply, and mentions sometimes with a burning blush of self-reproach, that once in an unguarded moment she addressed Miss Susan as "Thou!" This sin Giovanna will not easily forgive herself, and

never, I think, will forget. So it cannot be said that she is without conscience, after all.

And a more active, notable, delightful housewife could not be. She sings about the house till the old Grange rings with her magnificent voice. She sings when there is what she calls high mass in the Chantry, so that the country people from ever so many miles off come to hear her; and just as sweetly, and with still more energy, she sings in the Almshouse chapel, delighting the poor folks. She likes the hymns which are slightly "Methody," the same ones that old Mrs. Matthews prefers, and rings the bell with her strong arm for old Tolladay when he has his rheumatism, and carries huge baskets of good things for the sick folk, and likes it. They say she is the handsomest woman in St. Austin's parish, or in the county, some people think; and it is whispered in the Almshouses that she has had very fine "offers" indeed, had she liked to take them. I myself know for a fact that the rector, a man of the finest taste, of good family, and elegant manners, and fastidious mind, laid himself and all his attributes at the feet of this Diana, but in vain. And at the first sight of her the young priest of the Chantry, Dr. Richard's nephew, gave up, without a struggle, that favourite

doctrine of clerical celibacy, at which his uncle had aimed every weapon of reason and ridicule for years in vain. Giovanna slew this fashionable heresy in the curate's breast with one laughing look out of her great eyes. But she would not have him, all the same, any more than the rector, but laughed and cried out, "Toi! I will be thy mother, mon fils." Fortunately the curate knew little French, and never quite made out what she had said.

As for Miss Susan, though her health continued good, she never quite recovered her activity and vigour. She did recover her peace of mind completely, and is only entering the period of conscious old age now, after an interval of years, very contented and happy. Whiteladies, she declares, only failed her when her strength failed to manage it; and the old Grange has become the cheerfullest and brightest of homes. I am not sure even that sometimes, when her mind is a little confused, as all minds will be now and then, Miss Susan has not a moment's doubt whether the great wickedness of her life has not been one of those things which "work together for good," as Augustine says. But she feels that this is a terrible doctrine, and "will not do," opening the door to all kinds of speculations, and afford-

ing a frightful precedent. Still, but for this great sin of hers, she never would have had Giovanna's strong kind arm to lean upon, nor her cheery presence to make the house lively and sweet. Even Augustine feels a certain comfort in that cheery presence, notwithstanding that her wants are so few, and her habits so imperative, putting her life beyond the power of change or misfortune; for no change can ever deprive her of the Almshouses. Even on that exciting day when the sisters went forth from Whiteladies, like the first pair from Paradise, though affection and awakened interest brought Augustine for a moment to the head of affairs, and made her the support and stay of her stronger companion, she went to her Almshouse service all the same, after she had placed Susan on the sofa and kissed her, and written the note to Martha about her night-things. She did her duty bravely, and without shrinking;—then went to the Almshouses—and so continued all the rest of her life.

Herbert, notwithstanding his threat to leave the place next day, stayed against his will till Reine was married, which she consented to be after a while, without unnecessary delay. He saw Miss Susan only on the wedding day, when he touched her hand coldly, and talked of *la pluie et le beau temps*, as if she had been a stranger.

Nothing could induce him to resume the old cordial relations with one who had so deceived him; and no doubt there will be people who will think Herbert in the right. Indeed, if I did not think that Miss Susan had been very fully punished during the time when she was unsuspected, and carried her Inferno about with her in her own bosom, without any one knowing, I should be disposed to think she got off much too easily after her confession was made; for as soon as the story was told, and the wrong set right, she became comparatively happy—really happy, indeed—in the great and blessed sense of relief; and no one (except Herbert) was hard upon her. The tale scarcely crept out at all in the neighbourhood. There was something curious, people said, but even the best-informed believed it to be only one of those quarrels which, alas! occur now and then even in the best-regulated families. Herbert went about the county, paying his farewell visits; and there was a fair assemblage of wealth and fashion at Reine's marriage, which was performed in the Austin Chantry, in presence of all their connections. Then Herbert went abroad, partly for his health, partly because he preferred the freer and gayer life of the Continent, to which he had been so long accustomed, people said.

He does not often return, and he is rather fretful, perhaps, in his temper, and dilettante in his tastes, with the look, some ladies say, of "a confirmed bachelor." I don't know, for my part, what that look is, nor how much it is to be trusted to; but meanwhile it suits Everard and Reine very well to live at Whiteladies and manage the property. And Miss Augustine is already seriously preparing for the task she has so long contemplated, the education of an heir. Unfortunately Reine has only a girl yet, which is a disappointment; but better days may come.

As for the Farrel-Austins, they sold the Hatch after their father's death, and broke up the lively society there. Kate married her middle-aged major as soon after as decency would permit, and Sophy accompanied them to the Continent, where they met Herbert at various gay and much-frequented places. Nothing, however, came of this; but after all, at the end of years, Lord Alf, once in the ascendant in Sophy's firmament, turned up very much out at elbows at a German watering-place, and Sophy, who had a comfortable income, was content to buy his poor little title with it. The marriage was not very happy, but she said, and I hope thought, that he was her first love, and that this was the

romance of her life. Mrs. Farrel-Austin, strange to tell, got better—quite better, as we say in Scotland—though she retained an inclination towards tonics as long as she lived.

Old M. Guillaume Austin of Bruges was gathered to his fathers last year, so that all danger from his heirship is happily over. His daughter Gertrude has so many children, that a covert proposal has been made, I understand, to Miss Susan and Giovanna, to have little Jean restored to them if they wish it. But he is associated with too many painful recollections to be pleasing to Miss Susan, and Giovanna's robust organization has long ago surmounted that momentary wound of parting. Beside, is not Whiteladies close by, with little Queenie in the nursery already, and who knows what superior hopes?

END OF VOL. III.

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